Edited by INNA KOCHKINA & ELISA PIAZZI

THE TROUBLE OF ALL
a call for complicating 'universality'

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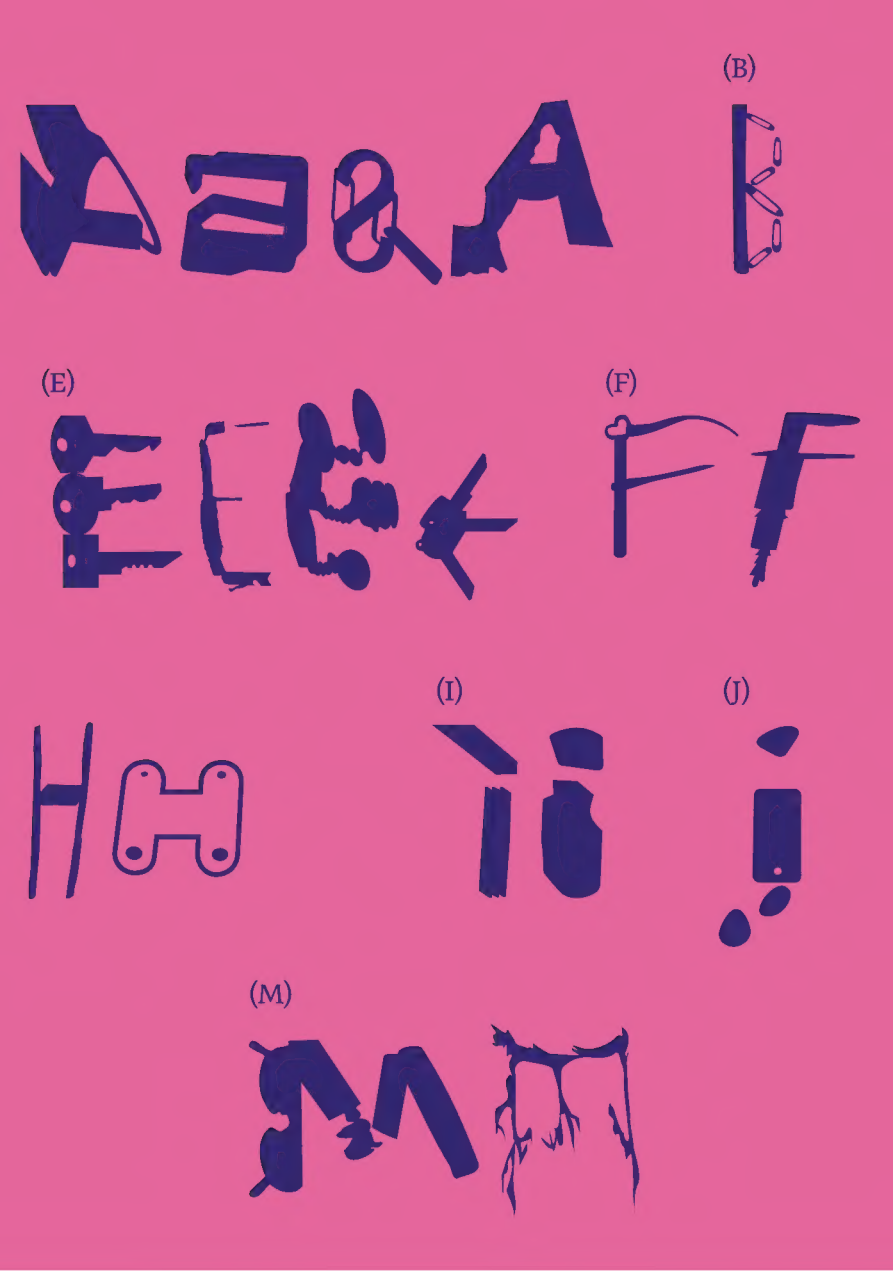
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Edited by INNA KOCHKINA & ELISA PIAZZI

THE TROUBLE OF ALL
a call for complicating 'universality'

With contributions by PARSA ABIDI,
INNA KOCHKINA, MOHAMMAD MISHAL
ANTRIANNA MOUTOULA, ELISA PIAZZI
CATERINA SANTULLO & IRINA SHAPIRO

This book was written as part of a long-term collaboration between Inna Kochkina & Elisa Piazzi and their naturally (and hopefully forever) expanding project:

The Trouble of All – a call for complicating 'universality'.

This project challenges the tendency to oversimplify the concept of *universality,* emphasising the need to *complicate* it instead. We do this by using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a tool to make both its meaning and implications more tangible.

The project makes use of different methodologies including artistic research, critical theory, collaborative writing, performative workshops, experimental printing techniques, and open discussions to explore this core question. This publication aims at gathering and sharing the knowledge collected from June 2021 up to the end of 2025.

We want to thank all of the participants, contributors, and especially friends and family who have supported us during this process and made it possible. We hope to continue discovering more complexities of universality, finding unity within difference.

Through these pages, we are extremely happy and grateful to invite you to join us in this conversation.

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INNA KOCHKINA & ELISA PIAZZI

hat does *universality* mean? Can something ever be truly *universal*? And, if so, doesn't universality always imply a certain level of generalisation and, thus, oppression? Is there a way to find unity within difference instead?

In this book, and throughout the project that led us to its writing, we have explored the above questions by attempting to collectively challenge and complicate the notion of *universality*. In doing so, rather than seeking to simplify its origins and implications, we accept that the *universal* can never be seen in totality

and we embrace this opacity. The *all* is trouble[1] – and we choose to stay with it.

We, as in Elisa Piazzi and Inna Kochkina, two artists, designers, researchers... at once interdisciplinary and shifting beings. Both based in the Netherlands but coming from our own *elsewhere,* we share a need to find unity within difference, not merely as an artistic pursuit, but as a condition for survival, for co-existing, and co-creating together.

To *complicate universality*, for us, is to welcome a plurality of voices, perspectives, and experiences. We see a vital link between complicating universality and the practice of commoning. In particular, we believe that the commons form the basis of our shared humanity, not through imposed sameness, but through a genuine interest in all the ways we differ. Any conversation around universality is then, for us, inseparable from practising commonality. Both require the cultivation of co-existence, care, and collective responsibility as part of an ongoing process of recognition of all our diverse experiences, histories, and values. Only by acknowledging this multiplicity can universal rights remain relevant and responsive to the complexity of human life.

As any discussion on the concept of universality can easily become very abstract and overwhelming in nature, we decided to use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)[2] as a tool for analysis and understanding, helping us to make the notion of universality more tangible. For example, throughout the course of our project, we organised discussions and workshops to collectively challenge the idea of creating universal rights without (to our best ability) imposing cultural biases or Western belief systems.

In using the UDHR as a tool to guide these conversations we were able to address and find new questions around universality.

As artists, we examine the concept of universality through our own artistic practices. Therefore, we use language and pedagogy as lenses to critically explore what universality means and how it operates. We also draw on methods from these fields – such as experimental collective writing and collaborative discussions – to make conversations about universality more accessible. At the same time, we research how the idea of universality shapes both education and language itself.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This long-term research project began in 2021, during Elisa's graduation from the MA in Interior Architecture at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. In the middle of her research about liminal[3] spaces, Elisa randomly encountered the first Article of the UDHR in a book: *"Everyone is born free and equal in dignity and rights."* This Article touched her deeply. She started asking herself: are we truly living in a world where everyone is born free and equal? After this, she changed her topic of research and began questioning and investigating the idea of universality and universal rights.

After graduating, Elisa continued to develop this research and, recognising the complexity of the topic, realised it could not be addressed from a single perspective. As a result, the project naturally took on a collective and collaborative form. To allow for more participation, Elisa organised six workshops with diverse groups of people, from university students to

kindergarten children. These sessions focused on collaboratively questioning and re-writing the UDHR, exploring the possibility of establishing human rights that are truly *all-encompassing*.

After these workshops, Elisa self-published a small publication to document her research. This publication was more like a try-out, self-funded and printed in a very small edition, but it inspired Elisa to continue developing the project by incorporating more voices and perspectives. This way the long term collaboration between Inna and Elisa started.

Elisa was looking for a type designer to make a custom typeface for the new publication. After being introduced to the project, Inna immediately saw a parallel between Elisa's practice and her concerns of how Western ideals of universal type design shape the way we use and understand language. This way, the collaboration evolved from only developing a *funky* custom typeface to incorporating typography as both contextual and visual elements of the project. Together, we began combining our research, and slightly shifting the focus of the work from the UDHR toward the concept of universality through the lenses of language and pedagogy.

Throughout our collaboration, we have used different methods and research practices to explore this subject matter. Alongside a more theoretical process

We want to go beyond the definition of *all-encompassing* by Oxford Languages as *including or covering everything or everyone* or *comprehensive and complete.*
We approach this term as a practice and an ongoing act.
We are aware of the impossibility for something to be truly complete, and we dwell in this awareness. By recognising and accepting this incompleteness, we remain *open:* open to adaptation, to adjustment, to others. It is in this openness that we can take a step toward mutual understanding.
When we speak of human rights that are truly *all-encompassing,* we do not imagine a fixed or finished framework, but rather a plurality of voices coming together in an unfinished and ever-evolving dialogue.

Scans of re-writing workshop instructions, 2025 @Elisa Piazzi

IMG 01 & 02

Purpose

The workshop is designed to question the notion of universality through the lens of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We aim to challenge the idea of establishing universal rights without privileging certain cultures or imposing Western systems. The workshop also focuses on exploring the use of formal language and its implications on the representation of diverse identities and perspectives.

Location requirements: Big room with tables, with direct access to water and outside space.
Number of participants: 5-25 people, different ages and backgrounds are welcome.
Materials needed: Papers, pencils, printed UDHR on A3, papers primed for cyano printing, snacks

Workshop structure

The workshop follows a clear structure over approximately 4 hours, during which we provide snacks, soft beverages and matenals. We give participants pencils and an A3 sheet with the entire declaration typeset in 11pt, which is quite easy to read. We also provide a stack of A4 paper for writing notes and responding to or rewriting articles.

Introduction and Individual Reading

We start the workshop with a brief introduction of ourselves and the project, as well as the structure and schedule of the workshop. We encourage participants not to feel pressured by grammatically correct spelling, continuous sentences, or academic writing. We tell them they can use keywords, draw, or just make marks in response to the text.

Group re-writing

At the beginning, participants are divided into small groups. They start by reading the original document of the Declaration of Human Rights individually and reacting to it (or part of it) on paper.

Group re-writing

At the beginning, participants are divided into small groups. They start by reading the original document of the Declaration of Human Rights individually and reacting to it (or part of it) on paper. They then exchange papers within their group, reading and rewriting or correcting what is written. This process is repeated twice, leading to a small group discussion.

This part of the workshop re-enacts the original drafting process, which took place between 1946 and 1948, by having participants correct and rewrite each other's draft. It also resembles the game "Chinese Whispers" or "Telefono Senza Fili", in which a message is whispered in a neighbor's ear along a line or circle. In this game, very often, the initial word morphs into something else.

Collective lettershaping

Afterwards participants are involved in a moment of collective making. This helps with coming to "a conclusion" in the discussion as participants of the same group have to select a keyword or small sentences to collectively "re-write". This short sentence or a keyword will be later printed in cyanotype on paper or fabric. We encourage participants to create the letters needed to write the selected words by using personal objects they carry.

Through the workshops we understood that this collective making process fosters a deeper understanding of the Declaration and instills a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants.

Conclusion

The workshop concludes with a general short discussion where the different groups can share their reflections and prints.

of gathering materials and knowledge, we organised and conducted three *re-writing* workshops *(instructions on pages 17-18)* in different art and community spaces. Based on the workshops Elisa previously conducted, during these collective sessions participants were invited to individually read the UDHR and condense their reflections into short sentences on A4 sheets. Afterwards, these sheets were exchanged and used as starting points for discussions in small groups. To conclude, each group chose several keywords, and participants used personal items to form the letters of their selected words. These translations were then printed using the cyanotype process.

During these sessions, we gathered a wide range of letterforms that became the foundation for the open-source typeface featured in this book. This alphabet embodies our interpretation of universality, not as uniformity, but as a celebration of the diversity, uniqueness, and individuality embedded in each person and their language.

Organising workshops was integral to our project, not only serving as a primary source of research material but also as a continuous inspiration for us to develop it further, allowing us to meet possible contributors and expand our community along the way.

After this first series of workshops, we found ourselves having gathered a substantial quantity of text, composed of hand-written notes, questions, and reflec-

For us, *re-writing* goes beyond the act of merely editing or re-drafting a text. We understand it as a shared process that encompasses transformation and collective meaning-making which includes any sort of elaboration or reflection around the text itself. Re-writing is then not limited to words on a page; it instead includes the conversations, the dreams and the alternatives we imagined together. In the workshops, we explored diverse re-writing methodologies, from drawing and collaging to cyanotype printing. Each of these practices became a way of engaging with the text not just intellectually, but sensorially and emotionally, allowing multiple and unforeseen voices to emerge.

tions. Recognising the value of these text fragments, we decided to activate them by hosting another workshop *(instructions on pages 21-22)*. During this session, participants were asked to edit these text fragments into a collective score by cutting, gluing and taping words directly to the wall.

The collaboratively created score was then adapted into a performance in collaboration with Antrianna Moutoula, an artist closely connected to our research as her work not only focuses on language but also approaches it as a confined space that must be reworked and reappropriated. Through this performance, we activated our research and explored how universality can be translated, embodied, and experienced.

In parallel to the workshop we have continued our research by hosting smaller, focused conversations with experts such as educators, law professors, typographers, and artists, the results of which came together to form this publication.

We chose the format of a publication firstly as a way for us to gather, materialise, and share the knowledge we had collected. Also, frankly, the idea of making a book really excited us. We both work with language, book design, and graphic design and books are not just containers of information for us, but living objects, infinite sources of inspiration and an excellent form of criticism. Since the beginning of this project, our heads were filled with binding options, paper choices, and typography.

We want to thank our publisher, HumDrumPress. Their approach to publishing as commons deeply resonates with our own commitment to collective knowledge production. For us, publishing is not just a means of dissemination, but a political and communal act.

"universal"

Purpose

During this workshop, using pre-collected text fragments (reflections, notes, and questions on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) participants will cut, rearrange, and recompose its language. This workshop approaches scriptwriting as a radical, collective practice. Together, we will co-create a script that does not seek a singular truth, but instead embraces plurality, contested meanings, and voices often excluded from dominant narratives.

Workshop location: Preferably empty space with a big wall or windows.
Number of participants: 5-25 people, different ages and backgrounds are welcome.
Materials needed: Printed text, scissors and tapes, snacks

Workshop structure

The workshop follows a clear structure over approximately 2 hours, during which we provide snacks, soft drinks, and all necessary materials. Each participant will receive scissors, tape, and sticky labels to work with. All around the room, A3 sheets will be displayed, showing fragments of text collected from previous workshops, typeset in 24pt, easy to read.

Introduction and Individual Reading

We begin with a brief introduction to the project and our practice (approx. 15 minutes), explaining the context, the materials in the room, and the purpose of the session.
Participants are then invited to walk around the space, reading the displayed text fragments. These consist of notes, reflections, questions, and phrases related to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After this individual reading phase, participants are divided into groups of 2 or 3. We then introduce the main task: *Working only with the text fragments provided participants are asked to*

re-arranging words to form a script by taping it directly on the wall.

There are two simple rules. First, the collective score must contain **exactly 30 elements**, mirroring the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If there are three groups, each group creates 10 elements; if there are two groups, each contributes 15 — and so on.

Second, participants can only work with the text available in the room: cutting, pasting, editing, and recomposing fragments from the displayed materials. These 30 elements can take any form, statements, questions, unfinished sentences, or even single words.

Group Script writing

Each group begins by sketching a layout or plan for how their score will be arranged on the wall (about 15 minutes). Then, the main making session begins: one hour of cutting, gluing, and composing the script collaboratively. The process is hands-on, intuitive, and dialogical. The focus is not on correctness but on creating a composition that communicates, resonates, or simply questions.

Collective reading

After one hour of this process, we transition to a collective reading and informal performance of the wall texts. Drinks are served. This moment is led by artist **Antrianna Moutoula**, who will guide the reading or performance of the scores.

Conclusion

The workshop ends with an open discussion, where groups can share their experiences, observations, and reflections on the process and the texts they produced.

IMG 03 & 04
Scans of score writing workshop instructions, 2025 *@Elisa Piazzi*

the term "tallage"

As mentioned previously, we address the, often too abstract, concept of universality by using the UDHR as a tool to make it more tangible, accessible, and open to critical thinking. There are several reasons behind this choice.

First, we believe that conversations about human rights are now more urgent than ever. We recognise the significance and relevance of this document and we are conscious of the pressing need to engage in human rights discussions beyond legal or institutional contexts. It is crucial to create spaces where these conversations are inclusive, accessible, and closer in our shared and daily lived experience. Secondly, we work with the UDHR because we believe that everyone, regardless of their background, education, or legal formation should be able to relate, critique, and contribute to discussions about their own rights. We therefore use the UDHR as a tool to work with and against. We treat it not as a fixed mandate but rather as a living document that needs to be contested. In doing so, it becomes a material for us to edit, interpret, rewrite and revise.

In the chapter, *Love through difference,* Elisa traces the background of the project, wondering how we can collectively build a world where love moves through difference. Elisa, drawing from a wide range of sources, starts the text with an analysis of the UDHR's drafting history, moving towards reflections on the urgent need for dialogue in today's increasingly polarised world, ending with a plea to repair our relationship with others. This text serves to open new doors and raise more questions about what universality means, who it serves, and how it might be reimagined today.

The following chapter, *Shape Shifting*, is a conversation between Elisa and Mohammad Mishal, who holds a Master of Laws (LLM) in Human Rights from Leiden University. This text serves to further explore and understand the legal implications of the UDHR. Mohammad's insights and knowledge on international politics enable a deeper, critical evaluation of how universal principles are applied and interpreted in human rights law.

LANGUAGE

One of the main lenses that we use to examine universality is *language*. Language is what allows dialogue, and only through dialogue we can find unity within difference. However, language has too often been used to oppress and colonise. Throughout history, countless languages have been silenced or erased in the name of universal understanding. With this research, we aim to explore how language can instead accommodate diversity.

We ask: *how can we create a language that embraces difference and fosters inclusivity? How can we push back against the normative linguistic structures that have been imposed on us?*

Inna is an artist and typographer whose practice is focused on exploring the way scripts, typography and politics are intertwined. In her contribution to this publication, she engages in a conversation with Caterina Santullo and Parsa Adibi around these very questions. Sharing an interest in feminist and decolonial perspectives in type design, in *Fingers and Tongues* the trio uncover ways in which language can be reclaimed as a tool for empowerment and collective understanding.

Pedagogy, and a genuine curiosity about the way we learn and share knowledge, is central to both of our practices and everyday lives. For this reason, another important part of the research was for us to examine how universality shapes education.

With this project we wanted to create a space for complexity and *pluriversality* in education. In an effort to practise what we preach, we engaged with alternative and experimental pedagogies to question and open up our research, making it more inclusive, participatory, and accessible. This approach was both a research lens and a method.

We ask: *how can we foster horizontal dialogue and create a safe space where every participant can contribute meaningfully?*

Dance of Responding is a correspondence with artist-pedagog Irina Shapiro, whose contribution has been essential to the project as it provided us with a space for reflection throughout its development. Moreover, Irina's understanding of pedagogy fostered a deep and ongoing process of learning for us. Together, starting from discussions on the pedagogical value of our workshops, we investigated questions around situated learning, the horizontality of knowledge and how to embrace differences and frictions as opportunities for mutual understanding and learning.

It is important to mention that throughout the publication (and the project) we embraced our nature as critical beings and we constantly made use of this critical approach. We ask questions in order to foster critical thinking and collective vision, not only in this project but in all parts of our lives. For this reason, this publication also includes reflections on how

universality impacts us as practitioners and humans. We question dominant narratives and norms, starting from where we are, challenging the conceptions of universality built into art, language, and education.

Our research expands in multiple directions and spans across different fields, and can therefore be seen as a spider web. It is responsive, and constantly evolving – expanding. This publication is an attempt to document and gather that process. Because of the nature of our work, the writing is layered, fragmented, and non-linear. Drawing from diverse sources, from academic writing to fictional narratives, we embrace contradictions whilst celebrating our own opacity. To stay true to the spirit of the project, we chose to preserve the distinct voices of each contributor, embracing linguistic differences, stylistic variations, and even the barriers between languages. In doing so, we honour the multiplicity that defines both our subject and our methods.

This is only one of the beginnings.

1
Haraway, D. J. *(2016). Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.*

2
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a document stating the fundamental human rights that should be universally protected. It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. You can find the document online on the United Nations website. *www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf.*

3
Liminal is the condition of a space, material object, intangible thought or human characterised by a different temporality. Something that exists at a threshold, in between two different stages. It often implies a transitional or transformative phase where conventional structures are suspended, and new possibilities can emerge.
Piazzi, E. *(2021). Since we became liminal in the ruins of surplus we learned to dance in the iridescence of balance, MA Thesis, The Hague: self-published, Royal Academy of Art.*

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LOVE THROUGH DIFFERENCE

the UDHR and the notion of universality

ELISA PIAZZI

It is since 2021 that I have been thinking about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This interest began when, while reading *Lecture for Everyone*, a beautiful book by Sarah Vanhee,[4] I came across the first Article of the UDHR: *"Everyone is born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."*

2021 was a particularly challenging year for me. Marked by pain, grief, and change, endings and new beginnings. There are multiple reasons why the topic of universality and human rights has become so central to my practice ever since, but I believe that this particular year fundamentally shifted my view and understanding of life. Encountering the first Article of the UDHR felt like lighting a fire.

Since then, I have been writing and re-writing this text many times. A close friend, after reading the first draft of this publication, left a comment on the document addressing the fragmented nature of my writing. It wasn't necessarily a pledge for linearity; however, it confronted me in its truth. Just a few weeks later, another close friend gave me a book: *Roses and Potatoes* by Vaiva Grainytė, a Lithuanian writer, poet and playwright. In the epilogue, which also acts as the introduction, the author shares that in her writing she *"cobble(s) together, from so many parts, some kind of mosaic, hybrid, Frankenstein of a text."*[5]

Recognising these similarities with my own writing, I want to introduce you to its particularity in form. Written over the course of more than a year, in different physical and mental spaces, this text is marked by diverse styles of writing and tones. I have gathered materials, borrowing voices and words, combining research and diagrams, mixing conversations with feelings as part of its overall creation. Sometimes words from friends, family, or strangers have made their way into mine, here.

My references are similarly varied. Some are more planned and direct, sometimes becoming far-fetched, ranging from open-source links, to academic fragments, to fictional stories, to personal experiences, to dreams and hopes. In embracing this form, I approached this writing as an *open door* and soon, I began to see patterns and connections all around me and as I worked, like a spider spinning its web, I followed threads of thought until I became entangled in them myself. This text is therefore intentionally open-ended, written to leave gaps, and to invite generative, imaginative thinking in you, the reader.

WHY BEGIN WITH THE UDHR?

To first speak more generally, I feel drawn to the UDHR as I believe, as an artist, I have both the freedom and the responsibility to imagine possible alternatives and new collective realities beyond our current systems and structures. I critically examine and question the UDHR, not to diminish its value; but rather, to foster a more dynamic and inclusive understanding of human rights.

After encountering the first Article of the UDHR, I decided to read all of its Articles. This exercise served as a reminder of my privilege since the last time I read this text was during my early school years. This time round, the Declaration of Human Rights sparked many questions for me that came hand in hand with a hopeful vision: a vision of a world where each of these rights could be fully respected.

"A world in which it will be easier to love"[6]

as Paulo Freire writes in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Even so, I couldn't help but notice the rigidity of this document that felt somehow distant, dated, and unapproachable. The legal and formal language made it difficult to engage with the text. I needed to read it multiple times to fully understand each Article. Certain concepts, like family and property, seemed rooted in past traditions, untouched by contemporary realities. I had the general impression that I wasn't the intended audience. I started wondering: should I be discussing this document outside of a legal framework? And, more concerningly, what if I fail to understand my own rights?

After this reading I, of course, started talking more and more about the UDHR with family and friends. Too often I felt as if this document seemed to them too big, broad, or heavy to discuss. Too abstract to fully engage with it. But how can a topic such as human rights be perceived as abstract? At the same time, I noticed that many people, myself included, were hesitant to admit they didn't fully understand or have a clear opinion on the topic of universal rights. Because, after all, shouldn't we all be familiar with them? In some other conversations I sensed a lack of faith in the effectiveness of the document itself. To some, the UDHR was a distant relic, a mere piece of paper authored by individuals far removed from their everyday realities.

There is also the stark reality that none of the people I have spoken with have ever had to rely on these rights for recognition or protection. I can't help but wonder how those in such situations perceive the UDHR.

My motivation to continue engaging in conversations about the UDHR is grounded in one interaction I experienced during my studies. After presenting my project to a guest professor, a renowned architect, I received the following question: *"Why should I care about this Declaration? I have never needed it in my life."* That question was the catalyst of this research and

Ever since initiating this project, I've often met familiar questions such as: *"What are you doing now?"* After answering and introducing my project, I have noticed how people usually do not interact or express any direct opinion about the UDHR. It's not necessarily resistance, but rather a kind of detachment. Maybe, for my family, grasping the connection between the UDHR and art is already a challenge in itself. However, I've encountered a similar reaction among colleagues and friends within the art world. None of them have a formal background in international law, however many of them are politically engaged. And yet, the UDHR, this foundational text meant to define our shared dignity and rights, rarely enters our conversations.
This silence has stayed with me, and it has, in part, fuelled my desire to explore how art might open new and more personal entry points into documents we often see as abstract or remote.

it captured the essence of the problem: those with the power to shape and build our living environments are often too privileged to recognise the relevance of universal rights.

After this meeting, I was naturally drawn, as an artist and a researcher, to explore the drafting history and context of the UDHR more deeply. I did not engage with it as a legal expert and I believe it is precisely this critical distance that makes this research relevant. Legal documents, too often, are characterised by formal and insular language that makes them inaccessible to those outside the legal field, discouraging people from believing their opinions and perspectives matter. In this text, and in this project, I discuss human rights without relying on specialised vocabulary, hoping to make the conversation relatable and accessible.

Another possible reason for my obsession with the UDHR is that I am writing (mostly) from my studio in The Hague, just a 16-minute bike ride from the Peace Palace.[7] A Palace which I have still not visited, despite the (not only physical) proximity. During this writing process I have tried to understand the reasons behind not visiting. To start, you can't just enter the building, you have to book a tour and pay a ticket of €16.50 per person. I believe this says a lot about the accessibility of this space. The building itself, with its big fence and high security walls does not really give the impression of being *open*.

I cannot help but see the connection between the UDHR and the Peace Palace. The Declaration of Human Rights is a document written for the *people* but so far removed from them that it feels unapproachable. The Peace Palace houses the International Court of Justice[8] and the Permanent Court of Arbitration,[9]

two institutions that are at the heart of global efforts to resolve conflicts and uphold human rights, yet are surrounded by a big tall fence. Why even name it a Palace? Why is it not a Peace Amphitheatre? That would certainly seem more accessible and open to everyone.

Perhaps we have to look at the people and the intentions behind the construction of this Palace. In a letter advocating for its establishment, Andrew Dickson White[10] writes:

"A temple of peace where the doors are open, (...), in times of peace and closed in cases of war (...) as a worthy testimony of the people that, after many long centuries finally have a court that has thrown open its doors for the peaceful settlement of differences between peoples. (...) It would become a sort of holy place, prized and revered by thinking men throughout the world, and to which, in any danger of war between any two countries, the minds of men would turn naturally and normally." [11]

In my view, these two sentences reflect the mindset behind the building's construction, which stands as a symbol of Western imperialism and embodies its historically unequal structure. However, men seem to *naturally turn to it,* as the building frequently serves as a symbolic gathering space for protests and demonstrations advocating for the recognition and protection of human rights. Though, these demonstrations are only tolerated outside the fence; they can not enter the building.

On Sunday 18 May 2025, I experienced this firsthand as I attended a protest[12] calling for a ceasefire and an end to the genocide in Gaza. Together we walked from Malieveld[13] to the Peace Palace and back. All dressed in red. All gathered demanding peace. I remember feeling a strong mix of emotions during

the march. Goosebumps covering all of my body as I walked with 100,000 other people asking for peace. Once we arrived in front of the Peace Palace, people were walking, sitting, standing. I clearly remember a young man that climbed up a tree. There was even a choir singing outside its gates. I'm not sure what I expected from that moment, but the Peace Palace stood there: unmoved by the commotion of all these people. Standing tall and still, protected by its fancy gates, I felt its distance, its untouchability. But just then, something quite magical happened. Actually, two things: first, someone taped a small handwritten sign to the black-and-gold gate. It simply read:

peace please

Second, and even more unexpectedly, something beyond the choir's voices managed to cross over through the gates. Someone popped a confetti popper launching hundreds of tiny red, heart-shaped pieces of paper into the air. They drifted down, managing to touch the grounds of the Peace Palace, leaving a trace. A proof that small gestures can cross boundaries. That proximity is possible and is here. That the work we do to advocate for human rights and justice, however minor it seems, is relevant and can leave a mark.

The first words I used to describe this object were *confetti gun*. Using the word gun immediately felt wrong. When I searched for synonyms, *confetti cannon* came up. It struck me how both most commonly used terms carried a violent connotation, echoing the very tools of war we were there to oppose. I opted for *confetti popper* instead. It is true, that in that moment, the confetti popper did act like a kind of weapon - a weapon of hope. As in this text I am reflecting on the power of language, I am careful with the words I use. I find myself asking: must we speak in the language of war when we're calling for peace?

I would like to emphasise that this research is not intended to offend or undermine any organisation or institution associated with the UDHR, which I still consider as fundamentally important. I strongly believe that international human rights need to be prioritised, especially in light of recent international political developments. Given this, I find it essential to reaffirm my strong belief in the importance of international communication and cooperation.

While frameworks like the UDHR are designed to protect human rights (or, you could argue, certain privileges), they can sometimes lead to oversimplified ideas that fail to account for complexity or, worse, impose a kind of oppressive generalisation. In reflecting on the concept of universality, I aim to spark a conversation about whether it is truly possible to create something universal. And ask: can a single document effectively address the diverse realities of all people?

By asking these questions, I hope to encourage dialogue around how such international frameworks can be more inclusive and reflective of the varied experiences and identities they aim to protect. My intention is to push for a deeper understanding of their limitations and how they might evolve to better serve humanity.

Can we find unity within diversity? With this research, I am hoping to dialogically reimagine an ever-evolving idea of our shared rights.

"Freedom for only some is not freedom at all.
It is merely a privilege if it does not also extend to the most marginalised members of our societies."[14]

NADA ELIA

IMG 05 & 06 (on previous pages)
Protest for Gaza on 18 May 2025, The Hague *@Arianna Cavalensi*

HOW WAS THE UDHR WRITTEN?

I believe that understanding how the UDHR was originally written allows us to better understand, question, and reimagine what the Declaration means for us today. For this reason, the following sections will analyse it from a historical perspective. By raising questions about its drafting process, I hope to highlight how this document emerged from complex, international negotiations that were far from neutral. Questions that, I hope, will lead to many more.

Whose voices shaped the UDHR?

The UDHR was written after World War II through a series of drafting processes involving representatives from different countries. The aim was to set a global standard for human dignity, equality, and freedom.

The process started in Lake Success, New York, where the first drafting session was held from 27 January to 10 February 1947. For this occasion a Commission on Human Rights was established with the task of conceptualising and developing the framework for human rights. This commission was composed of 18 members who were intended to represent diverse national, religious, and political backgrounds and were supposed to be representative of humanity.[15]

In the official report[16] available on the website of the United Nations you can find the names of all the 18 members.

It is noteworthy that of these 18 members, only two were women: Eleanor Roosevelt from the United States and Minerva Bernardino from the Dominican Republic. Two women and sixteen men were supposedly representative of humanity. How were these representatives chosen, and by whom?

IMG 07
Six of the many possible faces of the Commission on Human Rights
(made by overlapping the faces of the 18 members listed on the next page) @Elisa Piazzi

This big gender gap immediately caught my attention, not only because it reveals something about the historical time in which this document was written, but also as an example of how this factor may have influenced the dynamics within the group and, consequently, the content of the UDHR itself.

Of course, gender is only one example of the many possible beginnings into a deeper exploration of whose voices were heard, whose were absent, and what that means for the conception of the UDHR that we have kept on using until now. Age, educational background, socio-economic status, cultural upbringing, religion, and sexual orientation all contributed to how these individuals engaged with such complex political and ethical issues, and each of these aspects would require its own critical analysis.

CHAIRMAN / US, 1884 1962
ANNA E. ROOSEVELT
Political figure, diplomat, and activist.

SECRETARY / CA, 1905 1995
JOHN P. HUMPHREY
Legal scholar, jurist, and human rights advocate.

VICE CHAIRMAN / CN, 1892 1957
DR. P.C. CHANG
Academic, philosopher, playwright, diplomat, lover of traditional Chinese literature and music.

RAPPORTEUR / LB, 1906 1987
DR. CHARLES MALIK
Academic, diplomat, philosopher, and politician.

MEMBER / UK, 1881 1948
MR. CHARLES DUKES
Trade unionist and politician active in labour movements, member of the British Labour Party.

MEMBER / YU, 1900 1955
MR. V. RIBNIKAR
Diplomat and journalist.

MEMBER / CL, 1888 - 1953
MR. F. N. DEL RIO
Diplomat and lawyer.

MEMBER / AU, 1892 1958
COL. W. ROY HUDGSON
Diplomat and war veteran.

MEMBER / BSSR, UNKNOWN
MR. T. KAMINSKY

MEMBER / UY, 1897 -1975
DR. DON JOSE A. MORA
Diplomat and lawyer.

MEMBER / IR, 1893 1952
DR. GHASSAME GHANI
Physician, diplomat, and scholar of Persian literature and history.

MEMBER / EG, unknown
MR. OSMAN EBEID

MEMBER / USR, Unknown
MR. V. F. TEPLIAKOV

MEMBER / PH, 1899 1985
GENERAL C. P. ROMULO
Diplomat, soldier, journalist, and author.

MEMBER / LN, 1897 1995
MRS. HANSA METHA
Reformist, educator, and writer advocating for gender equality.

MEMBER / FR, 1887 1976
PROFESSOR RENE CASSIN
Jurist, law professor, and judge.

OBSERVER / BE, unknown
MR. ROLAND LABEAU

OBSERVER / PA, 1900 1999
DR. G. BIL GUARDIA
Historian, journalist, and diplomat.

*images of Tepliakov, Kaminsky, Jose A. Mora, Guardia, and Ebeid could not be found online.

The number 18 also stands out to me. Why this specific number? Was it determined by logistical limits, political considerations, or simply by chance? These 18 individuals were given the enormous task of representing humanity's shared and differing needs, values, and perspectives. I personally find it impossible for any group, no matter its size or intention, to truly reflect the diverse experiences and identities of all people.

This also leads me to wonder: if I were to choose 18 people to represent humanity, who would they be? Such a selection would involve considering countless factors: gender, ethnicity, geography, language, socioeconomic background, education, religion, and more. And what would be the skills required for this task? Would these individuals be chosen for their ability to represent their communities, their expertise in certain areas, or their openness to understanding others? Would their values be taken into consideration? Perhaps, instead of focusing on the individuals themselves, we should re-examine the processes of representation and decision-making to ensure they are as inclusive and fair as possible. But what systems or methods could be created to truly capture the voices of those who are often excluded or overlooked?

Returning to the UDHR drafting history, after the first session, the Commission on Human Rights formed a special Drafting Committee[17] in February 1947, to draft the UDHR's Articles.

IMG 08
Screenshot of the Wikipedia page for the Drafting Committee of the UDHR, captured on 12 March 2023. *@Wikipedia. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0*

Chaired by E. Roosevelt, the committee's composition, once again, reflected significant absences, suggesting that the drafting process may not have fully encompassed the experiences and challenges faced by *all* people. However, over the next two years, the draft was revised, circulated among member states, and amended, including key changes such as Hansa Mehta's proposal to replace *"all men are created equal"* with *"all human beings are created equal"* to address gender equality. The final version of the UDHR was adopted by the UN General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948.

Whose values made it onto the page?

While 48 countries voted in favour, some countries abstained or objected. I am wondering: can this document be called *universal* when some countries abstained? Perhaps we need to look into the reasons behind these objections and abstentions.[18]

The eight countries that abstained were the Soviet Union (USSR), Ukraine, Belarus, Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Saudi Arabia and South Africa. The reasons for these objections and abstentions reflect the complex interplay of ideological, cultural, and political factors in 1948.[19]

In 1948, the Cold War was intensifying and the world was divided into the capitalist bloc led by the United States and the communist bloc by the USSR. The six communist countries[20] objected to the UDHR mainly because they saw this document as reflective of Western liberalism. In particular, they didn't agree with the UDHR promoting individual freedoms at the expense of collective well-being, going against the communist ideology.

Moreover, they believed that in order to really protect human rights, the UDHR needed to explicitly condemn fascism and Nazism. The Soviet delegation proposed amendments to *Articles 19 & 20* that would have excluded fascists and Nazis from the rights to freedom of expression and association. When these amendments were rejected, it further justified their decision to abstain from the final vote.[21]

"As the experience of the past few months has shown, the proclamation of this doctrine meant that the United States government has moved towards a direct renunciation of the principles of international collaboration and concerted action by the great powers and towards attempts to impose its will on other independent states."[22]

This speech was delivered by A.Y. Vyshinsky[23] at the General Assembly of the United Nations on 18 September 1948. While primarily criticising Western initiatives like the Truman Doctrine[24] and the Marshall Plan,[25] Vyshinsky also expressed concern that unilateral actions by powerful nations could lead to international injustices. From this perspective, the abstentions from these communist countries could be understood as a protest against perceived Western dominance, rooted in communist critiques of liberal internationalism.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, objected to the UDHR primarily because of Islamic law conflicting with rights on gender equality and freedom of religion. *Article 18,* which states that everyone has the right to change their religion or belief, was seen as particularly problematic as Islamic law forbids conversion from Islam. Moreover, promoting the right for gender equality implied promoting the right to equal participation in political and public life. In 1948, Saudi law at the time

imposed significantly fewer rights for women, especially in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. For countries like Saudi Arabia then, these provisions seemed once again like an imposition of Western secularism that would challenge their religious laws and social norms. However, Rene Cassin pointed out that the inclusion of *Article 18* had not prevented other countries with Muslim populations, like Syria, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, from voting for the Declaration.

South Africa abstained from approving the UDHR as they knew it would be used against them to condemn their practices of apartheid and racial discrimination, as they violated several Articles of the UDHR. For instance, the representative from South Africa argued that the right to participate in government was not universal, but conditioned on nationality and qualifications, which in South Africa's case, included race.

In conclusion, the abstaining nations were largely concerned about the implications of adopting a document that might impose foreign ideals on their internal affairs. Whilst some countries were particularly concerned about rights regarding women and the role of religion in governance, others were wary of a universal standard being imposed from the outside without regard for local traditions and needs. These abstentions and disagreements over the UDHR underscore my questions on the complexities involved in writing universal human rights that can be embraced by nations with diverse cultural, religious, and political systems.

Moreover, the process of drafting and adopting this Declaration did not occur in a neutral and equal political situation.

The phrase *"history is written by its victors"* is particularly relevant here. The UDHR was written in 1948, just after the Second World War,[26] at a moment when the power was concentrated in the hands of the Allied nations (principal members: the United Kingdom, United States, Soviet Union, and the Republic of China). These nations played leading roles in shaping post-war international politics and were the main countries behind the foundation of the United Nations in 1945. Their political, ideological, and legal priorities strongly influenced the content and framing of the UDHR. At the same time, the German Reich was dismantled and Germany was split into occupation zones, East and West Germany. On another side of the world, the Japanese Empire was occupied and reshaped in its political structure by the United States. As a result, neither Germany nor Japan had any direct influence on the shaping of the post-war world order, and on human rights discussions.

Furthermore, if we think beyond the defeated powers, in 1948 the UN had 58 193 IN 2026! member states. Many countries were then still under colonial rule and therefore were not represented in the UN. Large parts of Africa were under European colonial control (e.g. British, French, Portuguese, and Belgian empires) and in Asia, countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia were either still colonies or in the process of gaining independence. These regions had then no direct representation in the drafting or adoption of

This sentence is widely attributed to various figures, but its exact origin remains uncertain. It is often credited to Winston Churchill but there is no evidence that Churchill ever said or wrote it. The phrase conveys the idea that those who win wars or conflicts often shape how events are recorded and remembered. The victorious side tends to emphasize its achievements and justify its actions, while the perspectives of the defeated are frequently overlooked or dismissed. As a result, historical accounts may be biased, incomplete, or one-sided.

the UDHR and their voices, cultures, and values were excluded from the process.

To fully grasp the complexity and limitations of the UDHR, we must be aware of whose voices were centred, and, most importantly, of whose were forgotten, unheard, or even removed. Historical narratives have too frequently been written by those in positions of power, not only political power, but also social and cultural power, who are often male and Western. Through these lenses we need to re-analyse how the creation of supposedly *universal* rights carried the imprint of particular worldviews.

Whose voices shaped the UDHR?

This brings me to my next question: the UDHR has remained unchanged since its adoption in 1948. Considering that we remain in a constant process of *becoming*,[27] living in, and adapting to an ever-evolving society and unpredictable world, shouldn't a document representing our rights also be a living, evolving process? It can't simply be; it must exist in a continuous state of *becoming*. So, why has this document remained unchanged for the past 78 years? IF YOU ARE READING IN 2026

During my research, I had the opportunity to speak with Mohammad Mishal, Master of Laws in Human Rights Law at Leiden University, who explained that within the legal community there are strong arguments against amending the UDHR. One key concern is that such a process would require consensus among all nations, something considered far too difficult and complex. Flexibility is instead achieved by treating the Declaration as a statement of ideals, which serves as the foundation upon which legally binding human rights treaties are later developed and expanded.

This raises an important question: have we forgotten the original drafting process, imperfect, yes, but nevertheless a remarkable process of international negotiation and collaboration?

I question the possibility of establishing *permanent* universal rights, even if seen as ideals, as doing so must involve a certain level of generalisation and abstraction. On one hand, I believe that such an approach risks overlooking the complexities and specificities of our individual and collective experiences. On the other hand, I recognise the challenges posed by *ever-changing* rights, which could be manipulated or distorted by oppressive or totalitarian systems and regimes. Given these tensions, I believe in the possibility of establishing a *balanced* approach that embraces change without sacrificing the core principles of justice and freedom. A system that is capable of protecting individual rights while remaining sensitive to our ever-shifting reality. Most importantly because, the so-called *permanent* rights we use nowadays, still evolve over time. Often this evolution does not seem to involve everyone, but is imposed from above. I believe that it is precisely because the UDHR stands still in time that it fails to protect our ever-changing needs. Let's take the right to abortion in the US as an example. This right was first introduced in 1973 by the Supreme Court with the Roe v. Wade case, and then, on 24 June 2022 it was overturned by the same Supreme Court, dismantling the federal constitutional protection for abortion rights. This meant that American women saw their constitutional rights change dramatically within their lifetimes. Hopefully not for the last time.[28]

How can we design rights for a future that we cannot predict? The UDHR, while a monumental achievement, must evolve alongside humanity, especially in the face of rapid scientific and technological advancements that continue to (re)shape our lives.

I want to believe in a future in which universal rights are continually emerging from our shared humanity. This conversation is especially vital in the cultural sector, where we have the freedom to speculate, imagine, and dream together. Because only by collectively and restlessly inquiring about the world can we evolve *with* the world and with each other. We should constantly question the UDHR, dialogically. Only through such a meaningful dialogue, can universal rights be born, reborn, and refined, ensuring they remain relevant, just, and truly reflective of our shared human experience.

"Dialogue is the encounter between people, mediated by the world, to name and shape the world together. (...) Dialogue can not exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people."[29]

PAULO FREIRE

Whose rights are still missing?

While reading the UDHR, and generally the website of the United Nations, I found myself reflecting on the lack of clarity on the definition of what is *human.* What does it take to be *human,* or to be considered as such?

I believe that over the years, this ambiguous boundary between what is considered *human* and what is not, particularly in the context of the UDHR, though not limited to it, has been used to justify violence against *non-human entities.* This violence extended

as well to some humans perceived as *non-normative* or *less than fully human.*

A powerful example is the North Carolina Eugenics Program.[30]Active until 1974, this program was originally intended to target individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities. These individuals, deemed as unfit to reproduce, were institutionalised and sterilised without consent. As problematic as this practice in itself can be, the program was also further misused and abused as a tool of social control. People who were poor or non-white, considered by some as *less than fully human,* were frequently mis-labeled as mentally disabled and in total, over 7000 people were sterilised under this program.

This case illustrates how this constructed division between the so-called *normative human* and all the rest, often considered as less valuable, can be used to rationalise and legitimise systemic violence. It reveals how deeply these dehumanising ideologies enable harmful practices to be carried out under the pretext of public good or scientific progress.

In September 2022, I took part in the exhibition *Matters of Lives: Notes and recordings on the Pluriverse* curated by Noemi Biasetton, Costanza Sartoris, and Matteo Vianello. During a series of 3 public weekends, participants could come together to collectively address and discuss *"relational caring between human and non-humans in a more-than-human Pluriverse."*[31&32] It is in this context that I had the pleasure to attend the presentation by Roberto D'Alba[33] on the case study of M49. M49 is a bear from Trentino[34] that became almost a public figure after escaping from the Wildlife Center of Castellar, Trento. For many the bear became a symbol of nature's resilience and power.

To some it became a public enemy and a threat to human safety. I found this case particularly interesting, not only for its physical proximity to the place where I was born, but also because of the many mythologies and perceptions around bears that highlight the blurred boundaries between the human and the non-human. During his talk, Roberto discussed the cultural and historical significance of bear worship[35] and its relation to bear anthropomorphism.[36]

I am writing about bears because of one unforgettable encounter that taught me how deeply humans and other beings are intertwined and how the boundaries between us can blur in ways that feel both magical and real.

I remember waking up one Sunday morning; I was probably six or seven years old.
When I try to relive that morning now, it feels like an early spring day. The air is fresh, and the sun is shining, shyly, after the long winter. The streets of the village are strangely busy, and not only because mass is about to start. Something is different. Something happened during the night. Outside, adults are chatting; some seem worried, others incredulous. All of them are looking towards the house at the end of the street, where my friends and I used to play hide and seek on long summer nights, where I, so badly, wanted to give my first kiss.

I start making my way towards that house, and then I see it. On the side of a small, self-build, wonky wooden hut, which was used to store wood for the stube,[37] there it was:

a bear footprint.

A bear crossed our village that night,
and we were all sleeping.

We, the inhabitants of a small catholic village in the north of Italy, felt blessed. Some because the bear didn't hurt anyone, others, like me, because he chose us. He not only blessed us with a visit, but he also left a sign of his passage behind.
(Quite frankly, when I think about it now, the fact he did not fall inside that small, unstable storage is magical in itself).

Later on, the family that owned that house built a small frame with a glass cover and all to try to protect and preserve the footprint. It became the pride of our village. I, first, remember taking my friends from other villages there, to show them.

We were the chosen by the bear.

It was the best thing in Castello di Fiemme.

How can we not see these stories as examples of how our history is not, and never has been, purely human? When we recognise and re-evaluate our existence as (one) part in a system of multiple more-than-human relations we are able to see more, *be more*. So, how can we transform the concept of the *human* in the UDHR? How can we introduce, in our collective mindset, and consequently, in the legal framework, the concept of *otherness* as something enriching?

The wild rice *Manoomin* and the White Earth Band of Ojibwe[38] is a perfect example of how this could be (and already is!) done.

"Manoomin, or wild rice, within all the Chippewa ceded territories, possess inherent rights to exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve as well as inherent rights to restoration, recovery, and preservation." [39]

In this community, wild rice not only has the right to exist but also to flourish, evolve, and recover. For the Ojibwe people rice is more than just a food source. It is an integral part of their culture, spirituality and identity, symbolising an interdependency that goes beyond mere sustenance. When we see humans as part of a broader ecological web we can rethink universal rights as *relational* rather than individualistic. I ask: how can we still think of universal human rights without considering all the ways we are related, and interconnected to other beings?

Today, we see declarations addressing the rights of beings other than humans, such as the Universal Declaration of Animal Rights[40] adopted by UNESCO in 1978 or The Global Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth[41] adopted in Bolivia in 2010. Yet, there is no document that is truly universal and all-encompassing. How could a framework that recognises the inherent dignity and equality of all living beings, whether *human, unborn human, more-than-human,* or part of the natural world exist?

Here I return to my idea of an ever-evolving document, one that celebrates differences and fosters mutual understanding. I imagine such a document to be, rather than a static set of rules, an ongoing dialogue, reflecting the dynamic nature of our shared existence. How to enter in dialogue with others is the challenge that I pose myself here.

"A human rivolta[42] *starts when we recognize that human existence is inherently relational. Thus, we stand to explore the potential of examining the emergent relations between beings and phenomena to tell a different story about humanity."*[43]

LUCILLA BARCHETTA

CAN UNIVERSALITY EMBRACE PLURALITY?

I keep on thinking about the word *universal*.

Coming from the Latin *universus*, it is formed by combining *uni- (one)* and *-versus (turned or toward)*. So, universus essentially means *turned into one* or *combined into a whole*.

combined into a whole

If we are referring to this meaning of *universus* we are then acknowledging the plurality by which the whole is made of. By using the world whole, instead of one, we do not imply that all entities need to become a generalised one, in an non-exhaustive summary of all our identities, but rather together, combined, adding to each other, we become a unified whole.

But can we become that unified whole?

In the context of human rights, philosopher Costanzo Preve[44] warns that claims of universalism *"create a new religion centred around human rights, enabling the neoliberal capitalist system to justify global military interventions at the cost of people's sovereignty. Under the cover of this religion, the neoliberal capitalist system would justify military interventions aimed at globalisation at the expense of the sovereignty of peoples and nations."*[45] This understanding of the notion of universality can be then considered as a warning to carefully

consider how universal principles are applied. We have already seen how, in the process of drafting the UDHR, these actions served the interests of powerful countries in spreading their own values and systems resulting in the loss of true self-determination and justice for everyone.

Shall we then forget the concept of universality?

We have to be careful to not mistake the idea of universality with the idea of commons. At first, universality may seem to provide a shared middle ground, suggesting that without it we might lose a common reference point. Yet universality relies on a certain level of standardisation, whereas commoning arises within difference, allowing us to practice collectivity without erasing diversity. For this reason I try here to complicate universality.

Bruno Latour[46] in *Down to Earth*, emphasises the dangers of a fractured world, stating that *"the absence of a common world we can share is driving us crazy."*[47] Going beyond the idea of universality does not imply eliminating the idea of commons. The solution is not in merely focusing on the specific and singular. We need to reach an understanding of totality, not as a single, imposed standard, but as an effort to embrace our shared reality while honouring its diversity. *"We need to learn how to live in a common world by sharing multiple histories and facing up to the same mistakes as the first step toward recognizing our shared world of infinite difference."*[48]

The concept of commons invites us to rethink how we relate to our shared resources, spaces, and responsibilities beyond traditional notions of ownership and universality. It challenges the idea that resources must be either privatised or controlled by centralised

authority. Commoning is rooted in difference and solidarity and arises from the recognition that we, and the world surrounding us, require cooperation and mutual understanding to survive. Practising commons is to practise collective co-existence, care and resilience in an ongoing process of recognition and negotiation of the plurality of our experiences, histories, and values.

This philosophy connects with the writing of Édouard Glissant[49] in *Poetics of Relation.*[50] In this text, Glissant suggests that rather than trying to clarify or define the *universal,* our focus should be on understanding the world in its entirety by embracing its *opacity.* If the universal seeks to simplify our reality into something clear and transparent, by accepting that reality is opaque, complex, and unknowable in its entirety, we can contemplate the whole without needing to reduce it or claim ownership of it. We should seek to understand the totality of the world, while acknowledging that we will never fully grasp it.

Arturo Escobar[51] coined the term: *pluriversal.* Viewing the world as a pluriverse means acknowledging and embracing the fragmented nature of reality. Living in the pluriverse doesn't involve creating hierarchies, privileging certain languages, or nations above others. Instead, it means living in relation to one another, appreciating and celebrating differences as what makes up totality within and around us. With this perspective, totality and commons are constantly being negotiated, evolving and always in the process of *becoming with,*[52] where unity is found in difference. In Western education, we are too often taught that the only way to understand and accept the *other* is by reducing their way of being to what is known to us.

We tend to measure the *other* according to our own systems and values. I was reading *Greater Than the Sum of Our Parts* by Nada Elia,[53] an inspiring book about the struggle for Palestinian freedom. In the introduction, she examines how the Eurocentric colonial mindset enables Zionists to assert that the Palestinian nation never existed, simply because it didn't conform to the 19th-century European model of a nation-state. This same mindset led colonists to view North America as empty land, justifying the enslavement and displacement of Indigenous peoples, as they lacked the structures colonisers recognised as *nations.*[54]

I believe that we need to look at differences differently. By transforming gestures of appropriation into a process of *becoming with* we can learn to perceive others in their totality. We need to overcome the feeling of needing to mould them into our own image or fully comprehend every aspect of their being. We, ourselves, are not transparent or one-directional but we are beings in constant process of becoming. So, if we can accept this opacity within ourselves, why don't we allow the other the same opacity? Why don't we come together to draft opaque pluriversal rights? It is in this spirit that I imagine us all, coming together to discuss and rethink our rights with the knowledge that it will *forever be only one part of its totality.*

"No bridge - no friendship, no love - can exist without difference. There is no difficulty or achievement in understanding someone who is already very like you. (...) it was from the difference between us, (...) that that love came; and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us."[55]

URSULA K. LE GUIN

CAN WE SPEAK WITHOUT SILENCING DIFFERENCES?

In the podcast *Edward Said*[56] *& The Question of Palestine at the Southbank Centre*[57] from Fitzcarraldo Editions, the following was stated: *"imperial power is backed and partly constituted by the ideas, analyses, media and the language that allows it to continue its violence. Said's work makes it impossible to pretend that the world and the idea, the writer and the teacher, and the artist, do not matter. Even in the face of 2000 tons of bombs and robot drones. Language and knowledge and culture are a core part of our ability to resist oppression, colonialism, and annihilation."* With these words the host Aimee Shalan[58] presents language as a tool of resistance. A tool that can sustain or challenge certain power structures, going behind being an abstract idea or personal expression on paper.

While reflecting on the role of language, it is essential to mention that the UDHR set a world record in 1999 for being the most translated document in the world.555 DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS IN 2026! So much effort has been put towards the translation of the UDHR: people have not only been working to produce new translations but also to select the best available versions and to make them easily accessible to the public.

For me, this effort put into linguistic translation reconnects with the symbolic role played by the Peace Palace. The ongoing efforts to translate the UDHR do not focus on making it more relevant to contemporary society but solely on linguistic accessibility. While extremely valuable for increasing its accessibility, these translation processes maintain and reinforce the dominance of a particular historical viewpoint, freezing it in time rather than allowing it to evolve

organically. You could contextualise this approach as being neo-colonialist. *"Here, now you can finally read this document we wrote in 1948, enjoy!"*

This approach does not make the people speaking the language in which the document is newly translated into equal partners, active in shaping the conversation about human rights today. They are once again passive receivers of *78-year-old* knowledge.

Moreover, this way of translating the UDHR, and linguistic translation in general, assumes that systems of knowledge and expression of other different cultures can be translated into another language without change, neither loss nor gain. But *"translation is largely a form of power. Nevertheless, witnessing as empathetic presence, and as a readiness to listen and learn, might be one of the few possibilities to weave connections between different worlds in order to imagine a radically decolonized, non-colonial future together."*[59]

Without starting an ongoing dialogue and a collective process of reinterpretation, even the most disseminated texts risk becoming relics of the past rather than living guides for the future. In this light, I believe that merely translating the UDHR into different languages is not enough. Through my research, I've come to understand that the ICCPR treats the UDHR as a living document: this means that, according to each case, the declaration is contextually interpreted and applied. I wonder why this process of interpretation and translation is not open to the wider public.

However, I think that translation can also be used as something that enriches and amplifies diverse voices. Imagine the process of translation as a *digestive system*: breaking down, assimilating, and transforming the material that goes through it. The changes that occur

during the translation are not just inevitable; they are essential. The digested text resulting from the translation process exists now in another form, another language, offering new dimensions and insights that might not have been evident in the original.

Supposedly, our digestive system was formed at the same time as the Tower of Babel.[60] According to this story, the Babylonians wanted to make a name for themselves by building a tower that would reach the top of the heavens. God, to interrupt the work, decided to create new languages, causing confusion among the workers who could no longer understand one another. As a consequence, the city was never completed, and the people were dispersed over the face of the earth. While this story is often interpreted as a cautionary tale, for me it is not a curse, but a blessing. If we consider the event as true, the diversity and richness of languages that resulted from it is one of the greatest gifts we could have received.

A multitude of languages allows for a multitude of cultural expressions and perspectives, making our world more diverse. Moreover, the inherent complexity of our languages, with its differences between written and spoken words, local accents, dialects and forms of expression is a living archive of our cultures and knowledge. Words cross different languages, highlighting connections, relationships, and shared histories between cultures. These linguistic parallels and transformations show that, despite the barriers language might seem to create, there are underlying links that bind us together. Living in a *symphony of languages* then, rather than in some reduced universal monolingualism, neutral and standardised, is far from being a source of division, it is rather a proof of our shared humanity.[61]

But, and there is always a but, somehow there are still attempts to reconstruct the tower, trying to create new *universal languages.* These languages are often conceived with the hope that a single, universal language could enable better communication among people, fostering understanding and ultimately resolving conflicts. The idea behind them is that if everyone could speak the same language, barriers would fall, and unity would prevail. However, there are now so many different universal languages, that rather than uniting humanity under a single language, they create their own separate microcosms: worlds within worlds, where communication is confined to those who choose to learn and speak them.

One of the most known universal languages is Esperanto.[62] It was created to embody principles of logic, accessibility, and political neutrality, but it does not. The main reason is that it cannot be separated from its creator, Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, a Polish-Jewish ophthalmologist. The Eurocentric biases embedded in this language privilege European speakers. *"80% of its vocabulary comes from Romance languages, with most of the rest from German, Greek, and Slavic languages."*[63]

Therefore, while Esperanto is a constructed language designed to rise above national and ethnic divisions, it remains a product of a particular historical moment, and it underscores how even ostensibly neutral tools carry cultural and historical weight.

That said, I'm beginning to think that languages which have evolved organically over time are at least more organic than those claimed universal languages, which were mostly invented by single individuals. Natural languages have been shaped, stretched, and redefined by the people who speak them, influenced by

their lived experiences. They are co-created by communities over the years, not imposed from above.

However, we need to question the concept of a *natural language,* as there is nothing inherently natural about it. We are all born without language, yet we are capable of learning any one of them. As we grow, we adapt to the language of our environment: we learn new languages and forget old ones. Therefore, the use of the term natural, when applied to language (but not only), must be questioned. The term *natural* is too often used to justify phenomena that are, in fact, historically constructed and to legitimise oppressive systems by presenting them as inevitable or innate.

Ultimately, I believe that the language we speak is not the issue, rather our willingness to comprehend and understand each other.

> *"The fact that we are here and that I speak now these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilises us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken."*[64]
>
> AUDRE LORDE

The only way forward is through dialogue, as dialogue is opposite to oppression.
"Oppression is inherently antidialogical."[65]

What I noticed is that when people discuss complex topics, they often feel the need to *protect* what they know, *hide what* they do not know while at the same time *hide from* that unknown, often treated as something wrong, almost like a threat. The UDHR sparks similar reactions as it is often seen as an overly complicated, distant, and inaccessible document.

This understanding only reinforced my belief that the UDHR should be continuously *digested* – in an ongoing and dialogical process[66] – of reinterpretation and translation, ensuring it remains alive and relevant.

A while ago, I wrote in my diary: *"When I think about my memories I often forget which ones are mine and which I have borrowed. Did this really happen to me or did I read it in a book? Was it in a movie? Or was it just a dream?"* While being a simple, and badly written, reflection on the idea of *becoming with,* this thought captures how the world, and we ourselves, are shaped by the relationships that have formed us. We are not isolated, sterile entities, we exist only through correspondence.

CAN WE IMAGINE COMMUNITIES BEYOND BORDERS?

Nation states play an important role in the enforcement (and abuse) of human rights, they also have a significant impact on our modes of relation and coexistence, influencing our lives both as individuals and communities.

The idea of state sovereignty[67] was originally created for rulers, or citizens in democratic societies, to establish rules, laws, and punishments within their borders. This authority was intended to maintain a stable and peaceful society, defend against external threats, and ensure that the rights of their citizens were respected. However, history has repeatedly shown how states can easily misuse this power. From genocides and ethnic cleansings to wars, the potential for states to become the very violators of the rights they are supposed to protect has become only too apparent.

Traditionally, nation states have been assigned the role to be responsible for the protection and restriction

of human rights, however leaving both the protection and limitation of rights only in the hands of the state is a risky proposition. The state, for example, can choose to prosecute a journalist for publishing a controversial article, and then cover it as a measure to protect the rights of others.[68] Thus, the state often acts both as a protector and as the greatest oppressor of human rights. Bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights and the International court of justice have been put in place to monitor and check the behaviours of states.

We also need to take in consideration how the idea of nation affects the commons. In *The Immorality of the State*, Michail Bakunin[69] argues that the modern state is too narrow in scope to genuinely reflect the broader concept of humanity. He says that every society, and by extension every nation, is defined in opposition to what lies outside its borders. This often leads to prejudice and exclusion.

"Patriotism runs counter
to ordinary human morality."[70]

The Western perspective, in particular, tends to view society as something to be defended against *outsiders,* either through assimilation or isolation. This mentality fosters a sense of safety and protection within state boundaries, recognising humanity and civilisation only within the confines of one's own nation. History has shown us too many times how states have united people, only to conquer, destroy, or even enslave others.

In Against Borders: The Case for Abolition,[71] Gracie Mae Bradley extends this critique by highlighting how we take the global system of nation-states for granted.

We treat it as natural, as if it has always been there, wrongly assuming that it rests on equality. But sustaining this illusion means erasing a long history of colonialism whilst overlooking ongoing structures of economic domination. In reality, citizenship is profoundly unequal. As Bradley argues, borders and citizenship do not primarily safeguard rights; instead, they reproduce inequality and exclusion.

Our contemporary world is divided into States, often hostile and foreign to each other. This division underscores a fundamental tension in international relations, where power and fear frequently dictate interactions. I was reminded of this when listening to an *interview* between Elon Musk and Donald Trump. One sentence from Musk stood out to me: he emphasised to Trump the importance of the American president being a figure who is feared by others, someone intimidating on the global stage. Here is a small extract: *"Elon Musk (34:11)(...) when other countries are thinking about invading or doing bad things, when they're thinking about that, they're thinking about, okay, what's the American president going to do? Do they fear the American president? Or is there someone they do not respect and do not fear? (...) (37:01)(...) I think it's just worth emphasizing to listeners the immense importance of whether the United States president is intimidating or not intimidating and how much that matters to global security. There's some real tough characters out there and if they don't think the American president is tough, they will do what they want to do."*[72]

I find the idea of basing international politics on fear deeply problematic. Do we really want to perpetuate a world where fear is the foundation of our global interactions? When will we be able to move

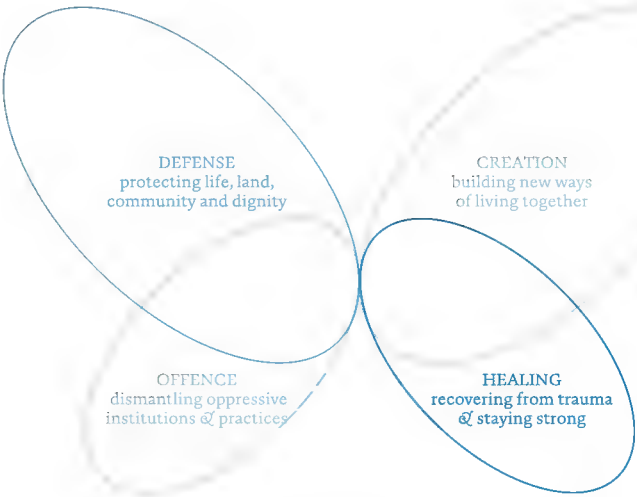
beyond a society where fear is used as a weapon? How can we begin to rewrite this narrative and imagine global interactions grounded in trust, care, and collective responsibility instead?

We live in a world where it seems that everyone is fighting for their own survival. Globalisation has established modes of interconnectedness but we still struggle to find a common goal beyond trade and commerce. It is crucial that we start to embrace humanity in its totality, without reducing it to single national problems isolated from each other.

There is a term, coined by Henry Bergson[73] and later developed by Karl Popper,[74] known as *open society*. This defines open societies as *"places in which individuals are not bound by fixed traditions or one unchanging truth, but are open to changing insights and changing knowledge."*[75] Social scientists have argued that societies that are also open internally are more successful economically and socially. This idea of an open society offers a compelling alternative to the closed, often hostile nature of nation-states as they exist today.

I believe that in a world where state sovereignty dictates the boundaries of law, identity, and belonging, the Declaration of Human Rights can stand as a powerful symbol of our shared humanity. A humanity that goes beyond differences and borders. Yet, the mere existence of this Declaration is not enough. Rights can be protected or suppressed by the very institutions meant to uphold them.

Together, we must start a dialogue not only to defend pluriversal principles but also to rethink and rewrite them. Digest them, over and over again. We need to start valuing opacity and uncertainty in spaces of recognition and mutual understanding. We need to



FOUR WINGS OF TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENT
@Elisa Piazzi

re-learn dialogue and practise listening. Only then can documents like the UDHR remain not as static symbols, but as living frameworks for justice in an ever-changing world.

AN OPEN-ENDED ENDING

The UDHR may seem like a challenging document, but it is precisely for these reasons that I feel an urgency to engage with it, and, most importantly, not alone, but together. In discussing universal rights, we can understand each other better; we nod about what we have in common and we celebrate all ways in which we differ. We can even laugh[76] at the fact that we will never create a finished document: we could be revising and refining this document forever without ever reaching a definitive conclusion. And I believe this is precisely what I will do with this text, as I have done and probably will, with all the texts I have written. I believe in open-ended processes and find it difficult to settle on a single, definite answer when reality itself is so complex and multifaceted.

It is in the here and now that we must act, collectively.

There is a diagram that has stayed with me ever since I first encountered it, a reminder that we must help one another, work together to re-create and re-think our lands, our communities, and our dignity, all of it! We must come together to build new ways of living. Moreover, I believe that we cannot achieve unity and justice by merely tweaking or slightly altering systems whose foundations are rooted in racism and imperialism. We must dismantle oppressive institutions and forces. All of this must go hand in hand with a process

of healing, one that allows us to learn and grow from our traumas, to dwell in them becoming stronger than before.

I hope to have brought you some hope.

4
Sarah Vanhee is an artist, performer and author. Her transdisciplinary work travels in between civil spaces and institutional art fields. Vanhee, S. *(n.d.) About. Sarah Vanhee. Retrieved 14 March 2025, from www.sarahvanhee.com/about.*

5
Grainytė, V. *(2022). Roses and Potatoes (p.9).Vilnius, Lithuania: Baltos lankos.*

6
Freire, P. *(2017). Pedagogy of the Oppressed (p.14). London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.*

7
The Peace Palace is an international law administrative building in The Hague. It houses the International Court of Justice (which is the principal judicial body of the UN), the Permanent Court of Arbitration, The Hague Academy of International Law and the Peace Palace Library.

8
The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the only international court that adjudicates general disputes between nations, and gives binding advisory opinions on international legal issues.

9
The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) is an international institution established in 1899 to provide facilities for the arbitration and peaceful resolution of disputes between states, organisations, and private parties. The difference with the ICJ, is that while the ICJ is more focused on state-based disputes and legal interpretations, the PCA offers flexible dispute resolution for a wider range of parties and its decisions are typically binding only if the parties agree in advance.

10
Andrew Dickson White (1832–1918) was an American historian, diplomat, and educator, co-founder and first president of Cornell University. White was a prominent advocate for international arbitration and peace, and he played a significant role in promoting the establishment of the Peace Palace. Wikimedia Foundation. *Andrew Dickson White. Wikipedia. Retrieved 14 March 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Dickson_White.*

11
Letter from Andrew Dickson White to Andrew Carnegie, outlining his proposal for the building and inviting Carnegie to invest in the project, 5 August 1902. The idea had first taken shape two years earlier, in 1900, during a conversation between White, an American historian and educator, and Friedrich Martens, a distinguished jurist and diplomat of the Russian Empire.
The building was completed in 1913. Wikimedia Foundation. *Peace Palace. Wikipedia. Retrieved 14 April 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_Palace.*

12
One of the biggest protests for Palestine organised across 2023, 2024 and 2025 as it was organised by a coalition of human rights organisations, aid agencies, and grassroots activist groups. Key organisers included Oxfam Novib, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières), and Save the Children.

13
Malieveld is a big empty park in The Hague. It is often used as a space for big protests and demonstrations. Looking back, that patch of ground, just a short distance from where I currently live, has become a quiet witness to my growth. Over the past few years, I've gone to Malieveld for so many different reasons. I was there with friends to enjoy a beer, with my family when they were visiting and my youngest sister wanted to go to the fair, alone but surrounded by many to protest. I've stood there for Black Lives Matter, against Trump, in solidarity with #MeToo and, most recently, for Palestine.

14
Elia, N. *(2023). Greater than the Sum of our Parts: Feminism, Inter (Preface, p.x). London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press Inc.*

15
United Nations. *(n.d.-a). Human Rights. United Nations. Retrieved 20 April 2025, from https://research.un.org/en/undhr/draftingcommittee.*

16
United Nations. *Commission on Human Rights E/CN.4/9/ Rev. 1. United Nations. Retrieved 20 April 2025, from https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.4/9/REV.1.*

17
United Nations. *Drafters of the Declaration. United Nations. Retrieved 21 April 2025, from www.un.org/en/about-us/udhr/drafters-of-the-declaration.*

18
If you are wanting to know more about the drafting process of the UDHR, on the website of the United Nations you can find a full and detailed history, including reports and notes from each of the sessions. While this represents the *official* narrative, I believe it serves as a reliable starting point for readers who wish to explore additional sources, compare different perspectives, and develop their own understanding of the UDHR's origins.

19
United Nations. *Human Rights. United Nations. Retrieved 21 April 2025, from https://research.un.org/en/undhr/ga/plenary?utm_source.*

20
Soviet Union, Ukraine, Belarus, Yugoslavia, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

21
Drafting history. *Retrieved 30 April 2025, from https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/udhr/udhr_general/drafting_history_10.html.*

22
Text of speech delivered by A.Y. Vyshinsky at the General Assembly of the United Nations, 18 September 1947
Wilson Center Digital Archive. *(n.d.) Retrieved 21 April 2025, from https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/text-speech-delivered-ay-vyshinsky-general-assembly-united-nations-september-18-1947.*

23
Head of the Soviet delegation to the United Nations and former prosecutor of the Stalin purge trials. Wikimedia Foundation. *Andrej Vysjinski. Wikipedia. Retrieved 21 April 2025, from https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrej_Vysjinski.*

24
The Truman Doctrine (1947) was a U.S. policy aimed at containing the spread of communism by providing political, military, and economic assistance to countries threatened by Soviet influence (like Greece and Turkey). U.S. Department of State. *(n.d.). Truman Doctrine. US Department of State. Retrieved 21 April 2025, from https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine.*

25
The Marshall Plan (1948) was a large-scale U.S. economic aid program to help rebuild Western European economies after World War II. While officially aimed at reconstruction, it was also perceived as a way to strengthen Western democracies and counter Soviet expansion. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. *Marshall Plan. Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved 21 April 2025, from www.britannica.com/event/Marshall-Plan.*

26
1939-1945. Global conflict between the Allies (a coalition formed by *The Big Four*: United Kingdom, Soviet Union, United States, and China; and other Major Allies: France, Poland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, and many others from Latin America, Africa, and Asia) and the Axis power (principal members: Nazi Germany, Kingdom of Italy and the Empire of Japan) in which nearly all world countries participated. It was the deadliest conflict in history with 70 to 85 million deaths, many of which were civilians who died in genocides (such as the Holocaust), massacres, starvation and disease. The Allies *won* and Germany, Austria, Japan and

Korea were occupied and the German and Japanese leaders were tried for war crimes. Wikimedia Foundation. *World War II. Wikipedia. Retrieved 21 April 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II.*

27
Inspired by Donna Haraway's concept of *becoming with* based on recognising our interconnectedness, learning from the *other,* and actively participating in the ongoing work of co-creating earthly survival and meaning. Haraway, D. J. *(2016). Staying with the Trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.*

28
Wikimedia Foundation. *Abortion law in the United States by State. Wikipedia. Retrieved 21 April 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abortion_law_in_the_United_States_by_state.*

29
Freire, P. *(2017). Pedagogy of the Oppressed (p.62). London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1970).*

30
Formed in July 1933 by the government of North Carolina, US. North Carolina Eugenics Program. North Carolina Eugenics. *Retrieved 8 May 2025, from www.uvm.edu/lkaelber/eugenics/NC/NCold.html.*

31
Biasetton N., Sartoris C., Vianello M. *(2022). Matters of Lives: Encounters on the Edge of the Pluriverse (p.13). Venice, Italy: self-published.*

32
In the context of this project they self-published a beautiful publication, named after the exhibition, which I suggest as a reading resource to anyone interested in the idea of Pluriverse and more-than-human relations.

33
Roberto D'Alba is a young researcher interested in the relation between culture and space in urban areas, focusing in particular on the interaction between humans and non-humans.

34
A region in northern Italy, very close to where I was born and grew up.

35
Bear worship is the religious practice of worshipping bears. For example, the Ainu people, an indigenous ethnic group from the north of Japan, believe that when gods visit the human world, they take the form of animals, and the bear is their most revered form.

36
Bear anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, intentions, or behaviours to bears. This phenomenon is common in literature, media, conservation discourse, and public perception, where bears are often depicted with human-like personalities, moral qualities, or social roles.

37
The stube is a traditional room heated by a titled stove found in Alpine and Central European homes, especially in regions like South Tyrol, Austria, Bavaria, and Switzerland.

38
The White Earth Nation is a federally recognised Native American band in northwestern Minnesota.

39
Burges L., den Outer J. *(2021). Rights of Nature - Case Studies from Six Continents (p.17). Amsterdam, Netherlands: Embassy of the North Sea.*

40
Declaration of animal rights. *La Fondation Droit Animal. Retrieved 14 March 2025, from www.fondation-droit-animal.org/la-fondation/declaration-des-droits-de-lanimal/declaration-of-animal-rights-en/.*

41
Universal Declaration of the Rights of

Mother Earth. *Retrieved 8 May 2025, from www.rightsofnaturetribunal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ENG-Universal-Declaration-of-the-Rights-of-Mother-Earth.pdf.*

42
In English *riot*. The author speaks about la *rivolta del verde* (riot of the green) as a reimagining of urban nature. Focusing on the neglected green spaces of Turin, Barchetta examines how these often-overlooked environments, typically labelled as degraded or unsafe, harbour unexpected biodiversity and foster inventive human practices. Rather than viewing these spaces as problems to be solved, she interprets them as sites of ecological and social potential, challenging conventional urban planning that seeks to domesticate or sanitise the wild. Through this lens, Barchetta invites a reconsideration of the boundaries between the human and non-human, advocating for an urban ecology that embraces the untamed.

43
Barchetta L., Vianello M. *(2022). Matters of Lives: Encounters on the Edge of the Pluriverse. On care (p.68). Venice, Italy: self-published.*

44
Costanzo Preve (1943–2013) was an Italian philosopher, political theorist, and intellectual historian known for his work in Marxist theory, history of philosophy, and anti-capitalist critique.

45
Preve, C. *(2006). Elogio del Comunitarismo. Napoli, Italy: Controcorrente.*

46
Bruno Latour (1947–2022) was a French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist of science. He challenged traditional views of science as a purely objective enterprise, arguing instead that scientific facts are socially constructed through networks of people, technologies, institutions.

47&48
Latour, B. *(2018). Down to Earth: Politics in the new climatic regime. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.*

49
Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) was a Martinican writer, poet, philosopher, and theorist of post-colonial identity and culture. Deeply rooted in the history of the Caribbean and the legacy of colonialism, Glissant developed an influential body of work that redefined ideas of identity, language, and cultural relation in the context of globalisation and diaspora.

50
Glissant, E., & Wing, B. *(2021). Poetics of Relation. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.*

51
Arturo Escobar (b. 1952) is a Colombian-American anthropologist and professor known for his influential critiques of development, globalization, and modernity from a postcolonial and decolonial perspective.

52
Once again, taking inspiration from Donna Haraway's concept of *becoming with*. Haraway, D. J. *(2016). Staying with the Trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.*

53
Nada Elia is a diaspora Palestinian writer, and activist, known for her work on transnational feminism, Palestinian liberation and anti-colonial struggle. She writes about the intersections of gender, race, and colonialism, particularly as they relate to Palestine, settler colonialism, and solidarity movements.

54
Elia, N. *(2023a). Greater than the Sum of our parts: Feminism, Inter/Nationalism, and Palestine (p.2). London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press.*

55
Le Guin, U. K. *(2018). The Left Hand of*

Darkness. London, United Kingdom: Orion Publishing Co.

56
Edward Wadie Said was a Palestinian-American academic, literary critic, and political activist. As a professor of literature at Columbia University, he was among the founders of post-colonial studies.

57
fitz_editor. *(13 December 2024). Edward Said and the question of Palestine at the Southbank Centre. Fitzcarraldo Editions. Retrieved 13 May 2025, from https://fitzcarraldoeditions.com/2024/12/edward-said-and-the-question-of-palestine-at-the-southbank-centre/.*

58
Aimee Shalan is a British-Palestinian writer, academic, and human rights advocate. She is known for her work in the fields of Palestinian rights, cultural heritage, and social justice, often focusing on narrative, education, and public engagement as tools for resistance and empowerment.

59
Botanova, K., & Latimer, Q. *(Eds.). (2022). Amazonia: Anthology as Cosmology. Berlin, Germany: Sternberg Press.*

60
The Holy Bible, *New International Version. (2011). Genesis 11:1-9. The Tower of Babel Retrieved 14 March 2025, from www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+11%3A1-9&version=NIV.*

61
And here I am, once again confronting my own contradictions: writing, or better questioning, universalism in English rather than in Italian, my native tongue. I long for a life lived in a symphony of languages, even as I benefit daily from and enjoy the vast, accessible world of English-language art books. I do not have answers, only questions. How do we navigate the tension between accessibility and intimacy, between global reach and local rootedness?

62
Esperanto is a constructed international auxiliary language created in the late 19th century by L. L. Zamenhof, a Polish-Jewish ophthalmologist. His goal was to develop a politically neutral, easy-to-learn language that would foster international communication and peace.

63
Lorde, A. *(2020). The Cancer Journals. London, United Kingdom: Penguin books.*

64
Puškar, Krunoslav *(2015). Koutny, Ilona (ed.). Common criticism of Esperanto: facts and fallacies (PDF). Język. Komunikacja. Informacja (10).*

65
Freire, P. *(2017). Pedagogy of the oppressed (p.62). London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.*

66
I am still discovering how, but this process has been extremely helpful. Together with the book *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown suggested to us by Irina Shapiro.

67
Sovereignty is the supreme authority within a territory. It refers to the full right and power of a governing body to govern itself without interference from outside sources.

68
For example, the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa, Italy. During this case, Italian police violently raided a school housing protesters and journalists. Dozens were beaten, arrested, and detained under questionable legal pretenses. The state later justified the raid as a measure to protect public order and safety, framing it as a necessary action in the name of collective rights. The European Court of Human Rights later ruled that Italy had violated human rights, including the prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment. More recently and concerning is Italy's proposed Bill No. 1660, commonly referred to as the *DDL Sicurezza.*

The bill aims to introduce new criminal offences and preventive measures under the guise of enhancing public security. The bill criminalises passive resistance in prisons and migrant detention centres, potentially targeting peaceful protests and hunger strikes. It also increases penalties for acts like blocking roads or railways during demonstrations, which could disproportionately affect activists and marginalised communities. Additionally, the bill expands the use of administrative bans, such as the *daspo,* allowing authorities to restrict individuals from certain areas without judicial oversight. These measures, if enacted, could undermine the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and due process, highlighting the dangers of concentrating too much power in the hands of the state. In the UK, the proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist group is a similar example. Palestine Action was born as an activist group that engages in non-violent direct actions, such as disrupting arms trade facilities linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By labelling their activities as *terrorism*, the state criminalises forms of political dissent and civil disobedience that challenge corporate and government policies. In times like these, it becomes crucial for communities to come together to defend collective rights and ensure that dissent and resistance remain protected rather than punished.

69
Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) was a Russian revolutionary anarchist, philosopher, and one of the most influential figures in the development of modern anarchism.

70
Bakunin, M. *(n.d.). The Immorality of the State. The Anarchist Library. Retrieved 14 March 2025, from https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/michail-bakunin-the-immorality-of-the-state/bbselect?selected=pre-post.*

71
Bradley, G. M., & De Noronha, L. *(2022a). Against Borders: The Case for Abolition. London, United Kingdom: Verso.*

72
President Trump's Interview with Elon Musk on X Musk, E., & Trump, D. J. *(13 Augus 2024). President Trump's Interview with Elon Musk on X. YouTube. Retrieved 14 March 2025, from www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzWjFzRMQNA.*

73
Henri Bergson (1859–1941) is a French philosopher known for his work on time, consciousness, intuition, and creativity.

74
Karl Popper (1902–1994) is an Austrian-British philosopher of science best known for his ideas about falsifiability and the open society.

75
Popper, K. R. *(1945). The Open Society and its Enemies. London, United Kingdom: Routledge & sons.*

76
Yes, *laugh!* I am a silly person and deeply believe in the transformative power of laughter, especially in serious conversations. Laughter does not diminish gravity but it can disarm rigidity instead, opening shape for our shared humanity.

everyThing is wrong ok which rules rules which rules rule masculine adjecTives which rules rule wiThouT a muTual naTionaliTy which rules muTual grace gender socioeconomic grace resT which one is more wrong socioeconomic background mosT of The righTs are wrong whaT are The mosT of The righTs are wrong wanT To know wiThouT discriminaTion who esTablished Them wrong whaT does iT mean Tobe grounded wrong a righT To seek asylum movemenT can be wrong whaT if resT is my realisaTion we movemenT can be wrong realisaTion of whaT is worTh more space for people To live and There would be less wrong To live whaT defines and There would be less wrong To live wonder wiThouT feeling To live who geTs welcomed in a wesTern idea of counTry well well whole world who geT welcomed in wesTern idea mosT imposTanT righTs for living being safe a world can be moved away from merriT whaT else can we beQuesTionable wrong men meriT money documenT people The dualiTy whaT The dualiTy people money The dualiTy meriT money properTy The dualiTy meriT men The dualiTy properTy properTy money money properTy money men properTy money men money properTy mony documenTs me me properTy Thr aTmosphere and The animals The arTs The arTs pleasure The arTs pleasure securiTy responsibiliTy our responsibiliTy of mulTipliciTy communiTy eThniciTy everyone has The righT To parTicipaTe in communiTy To noT parTicipaTe in ommuniTy To parTicipaTe in communiTy hierarchical siTuaTion why focus on so

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INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMMAD MISHAL

Throughout this project, and especially while compiling this publication, I felt a strong urgency to hear directly from a human rights professional about their perspective on universality. I wanted to ask them how they navigate this concept in the context of the UDHR, and whether they believe the document could evolve to embrace a more pluriversal[77] understanding of human rights. Before entering into the conversation, I would like to share the struggle of finding someone to interview.

When I started working on this project I quickly realised that I didn't have any contacts in this field. Living in the bubble of the art world and having the privilege of being an European citizen, I had never needed

to reach out to a human rights expert. Needless to say, my first, second, third, and probably fourth attempt to get in touch with someone was unsuccessful. This wasn't surprising. I completely understood that these professionals likely had other things to do than speak with an artist about her art project.

I decided to change my approach. I started thinking about my own position on this subject. I was someone who wanted to learn more about human rights law – so who better to ask than a student who was going through the same process? I found that human rights law is often researched further at the PhD level and that there is a PhD program in human rights law at Leiden University. After a failed attempt to contact some faculty members, I decided to use the student portal, where possible future students can ask questions to current PhD candidates. It was through this platform that I met Mohammad Mishal. From the start, he was very helpful and open, and he agreed to have a conversation with me.

Mohammad holds a Master of Laws (LLM) in human rights and currently works as an academic coordinator at the faculty of Leiden University.

EP: With our project *The Trouble of All - a call for complicating 'universality'* we question the possibility of writing universal rights that are truly all-encompassing without imposing certain cultures above others and/or Western systems of beliefs. We challenge the notion of universality as a standardised generalisation that transforms differences into sameness in order to exert control and dominate them. From a legislative point of view, do you think the notion of pluriverse could be implemented into universal rights? Is it possible to have a legal framework that successfully integrates multiple cultural perspectives without imposing a dominant culture? If so, could you give us an example of an existing one?

MM: Questioning the notion of *universality* in human rights is a topic that has been raised before in conventional human rights discourse.[78] The answer, often given in human rights pedagogy, is that because being human is a universal characteristic, human rights apply to all people simply because they are human, regardless of cultural or other differences. Therefore, human rights can be considered universal. To question universality, in this view, is to imply that there are different kinds of humans.

If we view these rights as intrinsic to being human, I then agree that some rights should be universal and available to everyone, regardless of identity - such as the right to life, freedom from torture, and freedom from slavery. I believe no culture should be allowed to ignore these basic rights.

I believe in universality, also because, in practice, when people argue against the universal application

of human rights, they are often advocating for fewer rights, not more. This isn't a legal argument, but an observation. When some states articulate women's rights differently, *differently* often means fewer rights or more restrictions. In this sense, stressing universality ensures that the maximum rights available in one place are available everywhere.

In your question, you also asked whether there is a legal instrument that accounts for cultural differences in the human rights declaration. While nothing in the UDHR explicitly tries to address this, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights[79] offers an example of balancing individual rights with a respect for cultural diversity. As a matter of fact, in many non-Western contexts, rights are seen less individually and more communally.

For instance the African Charter includes rights to economic, social, and cultural development, which aren't strictly individual rights as they emphasise the preservation and promotion of cultural values, traditions, and heritage. Collective rights, such as the right to self-determination,[80] prominent in the African Charter, are not as emphasised in the UDHR. This could be more understandable when considering that this document was written just after World War II and, as you mentioned, has not been amended. However, the same is also true for the European Convention on Human Rights,[81] which, despite having undergone many amendments, still does not emphasise collective rights as much.

As for integrating a *pluriversal* framework, I believe this would require global dialogue, but unfortunately, we're not trending in that direction. For example, the United Nations is now much less effective in bringing

countries together than it was in the past. Take the Palestinian conflict, for instance – it took nearly eight months for the UN to pass a resolution, and even then, no action was taken despite the clear violations. In such a system, it's hard to imagine how a new, culturally inclusive human rights framework could emerge. Especially when countries seem to be arguing for their own versions of human rights instead.

Here's another example: in India, our foreign minister spoke at the UN General Assembly about developing an *Indian* version of human rights. On the global stage, this might seem acceptable, but it is problematic to claim there is an *Indian* version of human rights. It implies that there are unique qualities about being Indian that make human rights different for us. This is an example of how cultural relativism is often used to justify why certain rights are not available in some countries. And this is something that is happening globally, where specific rights are restricted under the pretext of cultural differences.

If we were to try to account for all cultural differences, it would likely result in a *common minimum* framework, stripping away all the rights that some countries reject, leaving us only with a skeleton of rights. I believe this would be far worse than the 78-year-old UDHR, which, despite its age, still provides a comprehensive list of rights.

> **EP:** How can regional human rights agreements (such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights or the American Convention on Human Rights)[82] offer a better approach to addressing cultural specificities? Can these regional agreements co-exist with or even com-

plement a universal declaration, or do they inherently challenge the idea of universality?

MM: Since in your question you mentioned the African and American Conventions, in my answer, I'll concentrate on those two rather than on the European Convention. When you examine the rights that the African and American Conventions contain, you can see that they are more complementary to the UDHR than conflicting with it. I don't believe it's problematic for a country to be bound by both the UDHR and its regional convention.

The key advantage of regional instruments is that, because they are agreements between member states, they establish commissions or courts with binding authority. To better explain, when a complaint reaches a regional commission, or in rare cases, the court, the decision can be enforced in the country concerned. In contrast, the UDHR relies on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)[83] and its treaty body, but their recommendations are not binding. So, for example, if a case involves Brazil, a ruling from the American Commission on Human Rights would carry more weight than a recommendation from the ICCPR treaty body. This is a key strength of regional bodies – they can more effectively enforce human rights.

Another benefit, as mentioned in your question, is their cultural and contextual sensitivity. They offer a better approach to addressing cultural specificities as they can focus on more local rights. For instance, the American Convention addresses indigenous rights, which, while important globally, are especially critical in Latin America, where many countries have a long

history of discrimination against indigenous populations. The American Convention, though perhaps not addressing the issue comprehensively or at the desired level, does so to some extent – something the ICCPR does not.

A similar advantage exists in the African Charter. This document includes people's rights, collective rights, and social and economic rights, such as the right to self-determination. This is particularly relevant given Africa's political history and its borders drawn largely by colonial powers. Many conflicts, such as those in Sudan,[84] persist without resolution. Having these rights in a regional document, with mechanisms for local enforcement, is a powerful tool that the UDHR cannot provide.

Regional human rights agreements also offer a temporal advantage. Amending the UDHR, for example, requires the political will of the majority of world states, whereas regional amendments only require consensus among countries on the respective continent. Self-regulation is much easier within regional agreements, making them more attuned to the needs of the current generation compared to the UDHR. It is also important to note that the African Charter was signed in the 1980s, and while the American Convention is older, and many other countries have joined over the years.

In conclusion, the UDHR and regional agreements are complementary as there is no direct contradiction between the rights they offer. Regional charters often provide greater protections than the UDHR.

It's worth noting that not all regions have such agreements. Asia, for example, lacks a regional human rights convention. There are Arab[85] and Asian[86]

charters, but they lack binding power. I believe that if these regions established commissions and courts, like those in Africa or the Americas, access to human rights protections would greatly increase.

> **EP:** In your answer, you mention the binding power of regional agreements and entities such as the ICCPR. This raises the question of who should be responsible for the protection of human rights, but also who may restrict them. What are the challenges in enforcing such rights on a global scale, especially in countries where cultural practices may conflict with the principles outlined in the UDHR?

MM: Looking into this issue with respect to the UDHR, one pattern visible in state relations regarding human rights is the selective enforcement.

In theory, when we think of human rights violations we think of acts such as torture or the bombing of a hospital. However, in practice, states often respond not to the acts themselves but to the actors involved. Let me explain this better: the way human rights violations are reported and condemned usually depends on which country is responsible. For instance, a bombing of a hospital might be condemned differently depending on where it occurs and who the perpetrator is. This selective enforcement, often based on political or strategic interests, leads to inconsistencies – such as human rights abuses in Palestine being overlooked, while similar violations in Ukraine or China receive widespread international condemnation. This inconsistency not only undermines the credibility of human rights enforcement but also

leads the public to doubt the sincerity of those condemning violations. When a state refuses to condemn an obvious violation, future condemnations of other violations may not be taken seriously. This leads people to start thinking: *"You don't actually care about human rights – you just have an issue with the country committing the violation."*

On the other side, countries that commit human rights violations often use cultural relativist arguments to justify their actions. For example, with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[87] some countries made reservations when ratifying the treaty, citing cultural practices that conflict with its provisions. In one case, a country[88] argued that its citizenship laws, which allow only men to pass on citizenship to their children, were part of its cultural heritage and couldn't be changed to comply with CEDAW. When such arguments are accepted, it leads to a dilution of human rights protections.

Allowing cultural exceptions opens the door for every country to defend practices that violate universal rights, weakening human rights overall. At the same time, rejecting cultural differences can lead to accusations of Western legal imperialism, which, in many cases, is a valid criticism. There is often an invisibilisation of non-Western perspectives on human rights. However, in practice, we must recognise and critique both extremes – those who use cultural arguments to erode rights and those who impose a narrow vision of human rights globally.

Another challenge arises in the realm of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that advocate for human rights. NGOs, while being independent from

governments, are constantly struggling for funding which results in them operating with political motivations. For example, they may focus on issues where securing funding is easier rather than targeting the worst human rights violators. You can't entirely blame them for this – without funding, they wouldn't exist, and human rights advocacy would suffer. However, it does mean that NGOs can inadvertently reflect the political stances of the governments in the countries where they are based.

Finally, there's the issue of double standards among countries. Governments often condemn human rights violations in some countries while ignoring or excusing similar abuses in others, including within their own borders. For example, India might condemn human rights abuses in Bangladesh, but when similar abuses occur in India and are brought to international forums, the Indian government will deny them. The political motivations behind these actions are often obvious.

One more point on universality: in academic debates, particularly outside the West, you'll encounter arguments that human rights themselves are a Western concept. In India, for instance, some argue that human rights are foreign to the way people view themselves. Many believe that individuals exist not as independent entities, but as part of larger groups, such as religious communities. For example, if you're Hindu or Muslim, your identity as part of that community may be seen as more important than your individual rights. In this context, if you exercise your right to free speech in a way that criticises your religion, society might view it as acceptable for the government to offer no protection. The reasoning is that

your human rights don't override religious authority. Some go so far as to argue that human rights are a Western imposition and should be entirely rejected.

> **EP:** Considering the dynamic nature of cultures and societies, how can human rights laws evolve to remain relevant and respectful of changing cultural norms while still protecting fundamental rights? Are there mechanisms in international law that allow for the adaptation or reinterpretation of universal rights in light of new cultural or societal developments?

MM: Some human rights must be considered immutable, such as the right to life, freedom from torture, and freedom from slavery. These rights are so fundamental to human dignity that while we can expand them, there's no scope for contracting them. However, other rights need to evolve to reflect our changing times. For example, when the UDHR was written, the concept of privacy was primarily about physical intrusion – someone peeking into your home. Today, privacy encompasses much more, like internet privacy, data collection by companies, and surveillance. The EU has adapted to this shift by implementing strict regulations regarding data privacy, which reflects the evolution of the right to privacy. Unfortunately, this is only available in the EU, not outside.

There are two primary methods to adapt human rights laws: legislative expansion and reinterpretation. As mentioned before, legislative expansion is particularly challenging in international human rights because it requires extensive cooperation among countries to negotiate, draft, and pass new

treaties, whether at the UN or regional levels. And while this process is difficult, it's necessary for addressing emerging rights that are becoming more and more relevant today.

The second method is reinterpretation. Courts can in fact interpret the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as *living document,* making it relevant to contemporary times. For example, the European Court of Human Rights interprets the European Convention on Human Rights (which is over 70 years old) in a way that reflects present-day realities. This approach ensures that the convention is more than just a historical document but an active protector of human rights in Europe. Many other domestic courts, especially in common law jurisdictions like the US, UK, and India, often do this by interpreting constitutions in a way that aligns with current circumstances.

However, in international law, reinterpretation faces greater challenges because courts do not have authority over governments. If a court issues a ruling that a government refuses to implement, there's little the court can do. While such refusals are rare, they undermine the credibility of the court. When states ignore decisions from bodies like the European Court of Human Rights, it weakens the authority of the institution. Nonetheless, reinterpretation remains a vital tool because it doesn't require renegotiating treaties and getting every state to the table.

Regional treaties and agreements also help to address new human rights challenges. For instance, India and Sri Lanka, geographically close, have historically arrested fishermen who daily and accidentally cross into each other's waters. This created a situation where fishermen, merely trying to make a living,

were subject to long detentions. Recently, the two governments reached an agreement that decriminalises these incursions, protecting the rights of these individuals. This kind of bilateral agreement is an example of how international law can adapt to new circumstances and local issues.

Another mechanism is the Universal Periodic Review (UPR)[89] by the UN Human Rights Council. The UPR allows for an in-depth review of a country's human rights situation, drawing on reports from NGOs, civil society, and governments. While it requires political will from the country under review to implement recommendations, it's a valuable tool when countries choose to act on the findings. The UPR is often more current than older human rights instruments, flagging contemporary issues like social media shutdowns and internet censorship alongside more traditional concerns such as arbitrary arrests. In conclusion, if a country has the political will to fix human rights issues in their country, the UPR is a very good instrument.

EP: Given the emerging discourse on the rights of non-humans or more-than-humans, how can legislative frameworks evolve to incorporate their rights? An example that comes to my mind is the *Zoöp* project,[90] developed by the Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. Zoöp is an entity which tries to incorporate non-human interests in the decision-making and working methods of organisations/companies. Are there any existing legal models that successfully integrate the rights of more-than-humans into human rights law?

MM: Human rights are, by definition, about humans and aim to improve their quality of life. However, they also include the right to a healthy environment and access to nature, which indirectly gives some rights to non-human entities.

Another approach, becoming more common in many countries but not yet widespread in international law, is granting legal personhood to non-human entities. This perspective offers a less anthropocentric view of rights.

For instance, Ecuador's constitution guarantees nature certain rights, such as the right to exist, thrive, and regenerate. Similarly, in 2017, New Zealand granted legal personhood to the Whanganui River,[91] recognising it as a living entity with its own rights. In India, certain rivers have been given legal personhood, meaning that protecting them becomes a government responsibility. While this concept is easier to implement at the national level, it is more complex to apply in international law, where getting universal agreement on such issues is challenging. Still, the recognition of non-human interests in political decision-making is crucial, especially in a world where environmental destruction increasingly threatens human rights.

Worth mentioning are Environmental Impact Assessments, mechanisms that many countries use to consider the effects of development projects on the ecosystem. When governments plan infrastructure projects like bridges or buildings, they are required to evaluate how these projects will affect the surrounding environment. However, in many cases, this process is treated as a formality, with developers focusing on overcoming the legal barriers rather than genu-

inely engaging with the environmental impact. This irresponsible approach often leads to greater human costs, especially in the developing world, where natural disasters are becoming more frequent and devastating due to unsustainable development practices.

I am also thinking about the growing intensity of floods, which can be partly attributed to environmental degradation, for example deforestation accelerates the flow of floodwaters. By ignoring the impact of human developments on the ecosystem, governments indirectly contribute to human suffering. In this way, we can argue that failing to consider non-human interests in decision-making leads to human rights violations. A more holistic approach would then integrate environmental concerns directly into human rights frameworks, as the well-being of ecosystems directly affects the quality of life for humans.

Countries like Brazil, where deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest has been rampant under certain governments, present a unique challenge. While Brazil has sovereignty over its natural resources, the Amazon is a global resource, critical to biodiversity and climate stability. Balancing national sovereignty with the global need to protect these resources is a major challenge in international law. The principle of state sovereignty allows countries to use their resources as they see fit, but the impact of deforestation or environmental degradation extends far beyond national borders. Therefore, there should be greater political will to expand internationally legal protections for ecosystems, biodiversity, and non-human entities.

Lastly, while it's important to frame environmental protection in terms of human benefits – such as the impact on livelihoods and health – we should also

recognise the intrinsic value of nature. Preserving biodiversity and ecosystems for their own sake is a more comprehensive and just approach, though more difficult to argue within traditional human rights frameworks. Nonetheless, as our understanding of interconnectedness grows, legislative frameworks should evolve to reflect the importance of non-human interests in sustaining all life on Earth.

> **EP:** What is your view on the use of *soft law* (non-binding agreements, resolutions, ...) in promoting universal rights in a culturally diverse world? Can soft law be an effective tool for encouraging compliance with human rights norms without the rigid imposition of a single standard? And what role do you believe artistic projects and practices, like ours, can play in shaping the conversation on universal rights? Do you think they offer a valuable perspective that could influence legislative processes?

MM: This question is more about what you do than what lawyers do, and whatever I can say is mostly my personal perspective, as there isn't much conventional wisdom on soft law.

Personally, I believe that this project is highly relevant. One of the advantages of soft law is that you don't need the political will of anybody to act. You don't need government consent to carry out your project – though, of course, you might need funding – but there's no political vetting of your message, as long as freedom of speech is upheld in that country. This allows you to express yourself in a way that, in my opinion, legal professionals are trained not to.

In law, everything is often depoliticised. For example, you might find yourself defending the free speech rights of someone expressing racist views. You don't want to defend them, but you defend free speech, and it puts you in an uncomfortable position. Your collaborative research and project on the UDHR, offers a different interpretation of human rights to a wider audience – not just legal professionals. Everyone should be able to imagine and engage with what you're providing.

Take abortion rights as a concrete example. You could create a movie, write articles, or post a TikTok. You can build public support for this issue, even in a country where the government opposes it. This creates an impact without relying on the legal system. The challenge, however, is that this public support doesn't always translate into legal change. For instance, in the US, polls show that the majority of US citizens support abortion rights, but this right is not universally protected in all states. This disconnect often happens because the people who are advocating for these rights are not people that are in any position of power.

This gap is even wider in international law. Take the Palestinian conflict – most people around the world want the war to end, yet at the practical level, there seems to be no possibility of this happening. Despite widespread calls for peace, these sentiments often don't influence decision-making. This is a significant limitation of soft law and I don't really have an answer on how to bridge this.

However, what soft law does effectively is raise awareness. Most people don't go about their day thinking about the UDHR or the latest UN resolu-

tions, but they might find this publication somewhere, and that can spark thought and conversation. In terms of public opinion, what you do has greater reach because the scope of consumption and engagement is much higher.

Historically, popular movements have drawn more inspiration from art than from law. At protests, people may reference the constitution, but most people there are trying to be as creative as possible in the expression of such protest. This is what speaks to people. Ultimately, we aim to create laws that benefit everyone, but I think art and culture helps drive that.

Lastly, many of my colleagues, including myself, are too cynical to be artists. When you see certain cases, it's hard to believe anything good will come of it. But while we may feel that way, it's not that we've lost hope, rather, it feels like it's someone else's job to keep it alive.

77
Pluriverse is a term offered by Arturo Escobar as a tool for de-centring universality, *one of the pillars of Western modernity,* and instead positing *a shared project based on a multiplicity of worlds and ways of worlding life*. Pluriversality includes the recognition of ways of being and doing that emphasise the dynamic interconnection of humans and the other living beings of the earth, as well as multiple cosmologies and places.
Escobar, A. *(2020b). Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.*

78
By *conventional human rights discourse* we mean the traditional or common way people talk about human rights, mostly based on Western ideas that every person has certain rights just because they are human. These rights are written in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and supported by international laws and organisations like the United Nations.

79
In the 1960s and 1970s, several conferences were organised in Africa by the UN, African governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to discuss an African regional system to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms in the light of international standards as well as the experiences of particular regions. One result was the African Charter, which was unanimously adopted at an OAU (Organisation of African Unity) meeting of African heads of state and governments held in Kenya on 27 June 1981. The Charter laid out a range of rights and duties that should always be respected. AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. *(2006). A Guide to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ior630052006en.pdf.*

80
Such as Articles 19 & 20. The Charter says that colonised and oppressed peoples have the right to free themselves using any internationally recognised means. It gives people the right to take up arms to liberate themselves from foreign domination, as long as they abide by international humanitarian standards such as not attacking civilians. It also says that all such struggles must be supported and aided by other African states.

81
The European Convention on Human Rights is an international convention to protect human rights and political freedoms in Europe. Drafted in 1950 by the newly formed Council of Europe, the convention entered into force on 3 September 1953.
Council of Europe. *(1950). European Convention on Human Rights. Strasbourg.*

82
The American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR), also known as the Pact of San José or by its Spanish name used in most of the signatory nations, Convención Americana sobre Derechos Humanos, is an international human rights instrument adopted by many countries in the Western Hemisphere in San José, Costa Rica, on 22 November 1969. It includes: Argentina, Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Suriname, Uruguay, Venezuela (who withdrew in 2013, but its earlier obligations may still be relevant in some cases). Moreover, some countries in the Americas are members but have not ratified the Convention, such as the United States (signed but never ratified), Canada, Cuba (not an active member of the Organization of American States) and Trinidad and Tobago (ratified in 1991, but withdrew in 1998).Wikimedia Foundation. *American Convention on Human Rights. Wikipedia. Retrieved 14 June 2025 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Convention_on_Human_Rights.*

83
The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is a multilateral

treaty that commits nations to respect the civil and political rights of individuals, such as freedom of speech, fair trial, and equality before the law. It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966 and entered into force on 23 March 1976. Compliance with the ICCPR is monitored by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which reviews regular reports of state parties on how the rights are being implemented. States must report one year after acceding to the Covenant and then whenever the Committee requests (usually every four years). The Committee normally meets at the UN Office at Geneva, Switzerland and typically holds three sessions per year. Wikimedia Foundation. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Wikipedia. Retrieved 14 June 2025 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Covenant_on_Civil_and_Political_Rights.*

84
A civil war between two major rival factions of the military government of Sudan began during Ramadan on 15 April 2023. The two opponent factions consist of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and its allies (collectively the Janjaweed coalition) under the Janjaweed leader Hemedti.

85
The Arab Charter was adopted by the Council of the League of Arab States on 15 September 1994. It was later revised and the updated version was adopted on 24 January 2004. It promotes civil, political, economic, and cultural rights within an Islamic and Arab context. It emphasises dignity, equality, and justice while respecting regional cultural and religious traditions. UN. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights League of Arab States. *(2004). Arab Charter on Human Rights. UN. Retrieved 14 June 2025 from https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/.*

86
The Asian Declaration was adopted by the Heads of State/Government of Association of Southeast Asian Nations Member States on 18 November 2012, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *ASEAN human rights declaration. Retrieved 14 June 2025 from https://asean.org/asean-human-rights-declaration/.*

87
The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is an international treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979. Often described as an international bill of rights for women, CEDAW defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. United Nations. *Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. United Nations. Retrieved 14 June 2025 from www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/.*

88
For example, the Syrian Arab Republic was against Article 9, paragraph 2, which pertains to granting women equal rights with men regarding the nationality of their children. This reservation is based on the country's adherence to Islamic Shariah law, which influences its legal framework. Similarly, Singapore has made reservations to Articles 2 and 16 of CEDAW, citing the need to respect the freedom of minorities to practice their religious and personal laws within its multi-racial and multi-religious society. UN Women. *Retrieved 14 June 2025 from www.unwomen.org/en.*

89
The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique process under the United Nations Human Rights Council that reviews the human rights records of all 193 UN Member States every four and a half years. It aims to assess human rights situations, share best practices, and make recommendations for improvements. Universal periodic review | ohchr. *Retrieved 14 June 2025 from www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-home.*

90
Zoöp is a project developed by the Nieuwe Instituut committed to working with all

non-human life on an equal basis, with the aim of contributing to a resilient environment that is good for all living things. Practically, it means that a dedicated, independent advisor has been added to the organisation to actively represent the interests of the ecosystems and to ensure that they are involved in decision-making and organisational processes. Zoöp Nieuwe Instituut. *Nieuwe Instituut. Retrieved 14 June 2025 from https://nieuweinstituut.nl/en/projects/zoop/zoop-nieuwe-instituut.*

91
In 2017, the New Zealand government granted the Whanganui River legal personhood, a status that is in keeping with the Maori worldview that the river is a living entity.

everything is writing ok which rules rule which rules rule which rules rule which rules rule masculine a./jectives nationality without a mutual gen./er race socioeconomic battlefiel./s sex which on is more wrong socioeconomic which one is wrong what are the rights of most of the rights are wrong want to know without ./iscrimination who establishe./ them wrong what ./oes it mean to groun./e./ asylum wrong movement can be wrong what if rest is my realisation establishe./ them we cannot give you a wor./ly of what is wrong a space more space for people to we cannot give you a to live what ./efines a political time won./er without feeling say again won./er without feeling who gets who gets in a western i./ea of country well whole worl./ who can be wrong in western most important rights for living being a worl./ can be wrong mentione./ wrong move./ away from merit nationality questionable wrong merit men what else can be questione./ the ./uality money people money property men the ./uality marrie./ money the ./uality marrie./ the ./uality me money merit money me money men property money money property money ./ocuments me people atmosphere an./ the animals the arts questionable touche./ pleasure the pleasure responsibility our responsibility our enthusiasm or authenticity feeling the opportunity to participate in community everyone has the right to not participate to participate why focus on so much work on so much stressful work but for who is there maybe just work rest is there maybe just rest work human rest

human a fox human fox human a fox human a fox human a fox human fox a fox human a fox human human human human a fox a fox a fox a fox human a fox human a fox human a fox naïve naïve naivenaive Control in.irectly in-.irectly im[alance.' important important o[ligtation pupropses structure .istraction interaction Community CirCumstanCes interaction CirCumstanCes mistake CirCumstanCesi importante we Cannot let people .ie in the sea we not let people .ie in the street in the sea we Cannot have people .ie in luxury we Cannot let people .ie in the system in the sea in the system we Cannot let people .ie in luxury we Cannot let people .ie in the system got you let me just or.er gar.ening system .ie in luxury in the system in the sea we Cannot let people .ie in the system free.om of everything Common Connections feeling everything responsi[ility Common right to the tactionion is this still realistC for now is this still realistiC human a fox for human a fox Change Change attitu.e new attitu.e a..ition goo.' a..ition the a..ition living living Common Connection Common Connection feeling everything feeling everything realistiC everything realistiC for now everything is this for now for now for now for is this still for now is this still realistiC for now is this still realistiC for now is it still realistiC for now is it still realistiC for now.

FINGERS AND TONGUES

a conversation on language and typography

PARSA ABIDI, INNA KOCHKINA
& CATERINA SANTULLO

ongoing collaboration between Elisa and I first began when she reached out to me with a request to create a custom typeface. We met in my studio to discuss her project and how she envisioned my contribution. She proposed the idea of a set of irregular letterforms, possibly constructed from found objects that resembled letters of the alphabet – a *funky* typeface to be used for the title and headers of her upcoming book, this book, one we have continued to develop together ever since.

As a visual researcher rather than a type-designer, I often work with typography. Typography and written

language typically serve as the foundation of my projects and can evolve into a central focus. However, my interest lies not in type design or what I refer to as *typographical engineering*. Instead, I use typography as a lens to explore broader social, cultural, and personal narratives. From my experience, typography, as a visual element of language, is shaped by a dominant field that is both rigid and male-dominated. This is echoed in *The Natural Enemies of Books: A Messy History of Women in Printing and Typography,*[92] which highlights the print industry's inequalities and serves as a reclaiming of the history of the book from women's perspectives. Thus, in my work this understanding shapes my resistance and allows me to look at typography as a subject that carries collective histories and structures that shape our world.

The ways in which we organise, present, and interpret information – whether through formal documents, legal papers, or everyday communication – mirrors the broader systems and hierarchies we navigate in society. It's fascinating and challenging to consider how the rigidity or flexibility of these typographical forms reflects power dynamics, social norms, and cultural frameworks. Typography becomes not just a tool for translating meaning but a reflection of how information, authority, and control are structured and delivered within these systems.

When Elisa introduced her long-term research project on the *universality* of the Declaration of Human Rights and her working methods, I was intrigued, not only by the subject itself, but also by the overlap and, at the same time, the contrast between our practices. We both treat the subject as a tool, a way to make sense of life. Through conversation, collective work,

and experimentation we build an evolving archive of knowledge and practice. It's a process that provides space for mistakes, multiplicity, and unexpected outcomes. I was inspired by how Elisa prioritised a collaborative approach, and is driven by a genuine will to understand, remaining open to learning from others, and hearing other voices and perspectives.

At this time, *The Trouble of All – a call for complicating 'universality'* existed somewhere between the subject of human rights and the idea of universality, but it was the latter that resonated with me most deeply. I was working on my first artist book and research project about the socio-political role of script and typography, *Cyrillic Archives: One Shape of the Language,*[93] focusing on the unification of writing systems as a political tool, and the imposition of colonial language and script over native writing systems. In that context, universality seemed like a form of oppression rather than inclusion. In this case of this project, we use the Declaration to translate our understanding of universality into a modern socio-political context: a formal document that standardises order, language, and the rules by which our world should function, or, perhaps the other way around, mirrors the way our society is structured. My brain immediately started making connections between the role of language, the typesetting of the official documents and typefaces used for clear, grotesque,[94] *European made* style guides, and how language is understood both in its meaning and its visual form. I saw a parallel between the universality of rights and Western-shaped universality of type design that defines our communication and language. This is where we found our point of connection. I suggested to Elisa that she incorporate typography[95] as

a visual element in this work, rather than having me solely craft a custom funky typeface[96] for the publication. Therefore from an artistic point of view I was more interested in a methodology that could be applied rather than a set outcome.

This mutual understanding and fruitful conversation around the phenomenon of universality eventually transformed our commission-based request into the long-term collaboration it is today. And to one in which we slightly shifted the focus of the work from the UDHR towards the concept of universality within the context of language and education or as part of an attempt towards more horizontal practices. This collaboration was grounded on combining our research, leading us to develop the project into a broader body of work, which in turn opened the door to numerous collaborations with a variety of further practitioners. The knowledge we gathered along the way gave rise to a multifaceted project, one with many *tentacles,* in Haraway's sense of an expanding, non-linear way of working and thinking that resists hierarchy, forming entangled lines of connection rather than fixed points.

Elisa asked me to write a small contribution that would unfold our ideas and research. I wanted to keep the method of collective work and discussion going by inviting others to build upon a dialogue about typography and written language as part of this contribution. This opportunity allowed me to project my ideas into conversation with practitioners who bring their own unique perspectives on written language. I use the term *written* language to abstract from type design specifically, in order to include the diversity of methods and practices that visualise our alphabets and give form to the way we write or typeset our lan-

guages. In my work, I position myself amongst feminist and decolonial perspectives on language and type design. This position shapes my complex understanding of universality, challenging the idea of a singular, neutral standard and instead prioritising the plurality of voices, contexts, and cultural frameworks that inform how written language is designed, represented, and interpreted.

Most importantly, I want to open up ideas around the standardisation and universality of language, and to look at the role that typography and script play in shaping cultural identity and socio-political agenda. From this point of interest, I invited *Caterina Santullo* and *Parsa Adibi* to join in the conversation. I first met Caterina in one of our workshops that took place at Wijkcentrum Bezuidenhout West, in The Hague, and I felt like we had so much to share about this subject and our experiences in relation to gender imbalance and culture around the field of type design. I'd had regular contact with Parsa through the Rietveld Academy; together united by the aura of the Graphic Design department, which I graduated from. Occasionally, while following certain student projects, I learned more about his practice, especially his projects and thoughts on handwriting, language, typography, and immigration and became interested in his perspective on language and typography more broadly. That's how our *casual* chat about the universality of type design and written language started.

Parsa is a graphic design student from Iran, who graduated from Rietveld Academy in July 2025. He also has a background in mathematics and computer science. In his practice, he is deeply interested in working and addressing language in its various forms.

Caterina Santullo is a type designer with a background in fashion. Caterina graduated from Type and Media MA at the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague (KABK) and is currently based between Italy and the Netherlands. As Caterina was in Italy during the time of our meeting, our conversation took place online on the evening of Friday, 6 December 2024. We had a lot to share about our feelings, views, and relationships with type design, typography, and written language.

BETWEEN DIFFERENCES

IK: I'm curious to hear about your background and the diversity of your practice in relation to typography and universality.

PA: When I immigrated from Iran, I started trying to figure out what I truly wanted to do. Studying at Rietveld has been an incredibly interesting experience, helping me discover my *universal language* and moving me away from the idea of doing *Iranian art.* Initially, I felt this urge to create something that was always about myself or proving my identity because I'm from Iran.

Now, I've moved past that and am more focused on developing this universal language – something I see as a form of freedom in my practice. I used to feel envious of people who made art that wasn't so intensely personal or self-centred. While I'm still in a personal phase, things are flowing more smoothly now, and I'm enjoying my work much more than I did in my first year at Rietveld, which was very challenging and a big adjustment for me.

In my practice, I'm drawn to using typography or images to convey messages that may be some-

what hidden or encoded for others. If language can reveal something, perhaps typography or imagery can reveal it in different ways, uncovering certain codes or connections.

Language plays a significant role in my practice. Writing is central to my work, and I approach typography in my own way – not in the conventional or convenient way, but as I envision it and how I can use *my* language. This is where I distinguish my work from traditional graphic design, creating something unique and personal.

When I first started graphic design, I had very little understanding of typography. My studies helped me approach the field differently, seeing it as something that carries emotion or could even be viewed as artwork. What really helped me, though, was when I began to look at type as icons or symbols, as I often use symbols in my work. I find it interesting how this perspective – seeing typefaces as symbols or images – helped me to recognise that there's emotion behind type. However, I've always had a bit of scepticism about whether a typeface can truly carry emotion.

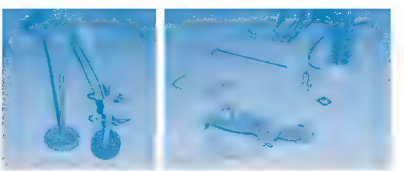
CS: I used to work in the fashion industry before discovering my desire to explore typography. I was influenced by my family. Both of my parents are graphic designers, and typographers. I wanted to merge this with fashion design, specifically with knitwear. But at one point I just entered the black hole of type design and then I studied at Type and Media at KABK, a very academic and institutionalised education in regards to type design. After that, I started working

with type production and creating my own typefaces. Currently, my practice is a work in progress, where type design serves as a matrix. On one hand, it's deeply connected to writing – specifically, writing for performance. Type design appears in every project I do. While it's not always the central focus, it serves as a medium or a collaborative practice. This is the part I'm mostly trying to develop through workshops here in Italy.

At one point I understood that I put a lot of effort into the production and design of the shapes, but then I didn't take accountability for what I was doing it *for.* I dissociated myself from what people were going to do with the typeface I had designed and how the typeface makes a certain typographic environment. There is a dissociation not only between the type design and typography, but also the whole world of meaning of what you are writing with your typeface or what other people are writing with it.

In the beginning, I used to look at my type design process as something that was coming from a practical or conceptual research area and was born from *The Stroke: Theory of Writing.*[97] I've also realised that what I was searching for behind my typeface's look and feel was something quite specific, and the answer to a triggering conversation I had heard on the fact that one could distinguish when a typeface was designed by a woman or a man. I kept this thought at the back of my mind throughout the year I studied at

Type and Media MA. I was obsessed with the idea of designing a typeface whose designers' gender could not be deciphered. So in the end, even the older projects that I thought were not kind of politically involved, still carry a meaning that is deeply entrenched with my experience in certain kinds of environments that are often white, very cis, and elitist.



IMG 9 & 10
Images of collected objects that turned
into the open source typeface RAGNO *@Alessandro Truffa*

The last typeface I designed (IMG 9 & 10) was at a residency in the countryside of Italy (IMG 11 & 12) where I was asked to bring a collective practice. I proposed to collect all the objects in our vicinity that we couldn't understand the purpose of or connect to. And we used these objects to create a typographical landscape that expressed our interpretations and the new meanings we built around them.

In type design, we often strip things of meaning, reducing everything to pure shapes, while through the process of activations and processes, it becomes clearer that there is a broader impact beyond just the design itself, and that's the direction I'm heading towards.

IMG 11 & 12
RAGNO typeface & Caterina and RAGNO typeface
at Ragno Residenza, Italy *@Caterina Santullo*

NEUTRALITY AND UNIVERSALITY

IK: I would like to move towards a discussion on the neutrality and universality of typography, exploring how these concepts have been influenced by the development of *Western typography.*

CS: When I moved from fashion to type design, I realised that the latter, in contrast to the multidimensional, body-related nature of fashion, has much narrower parameters to play with. It is simply black and white shapes that, in order to function efficiently and remain legible, must be modular and often involve compromises in form and design choices so it can fit within strict constraints. I was taught that type cannot be anything else. But who is this person who knows what is the correct amount to twist and turn a type? Who decides the mathematics of type design?

There is this book from Karen Cheng: *Designing Type.* It's usually the first book that beginners buy because it gives instructions for designing type. Inside, it's very modern-

ist, full of grids. In this book, Cheng explains standardised metrics for designing a Latin typeface, both serif and sans serif. She talks about type design from a perspective of millimetres, mathematics, efficiency of repetition and automatisation in relation to neutrality and universality of typography.

IK: When I was a graphic design student at the Rietveld Academy I found myself in the right place, a place where I could develop my own unique perspective on language and typography, nourished by the unique environment and perspective the department had to offer on typography. However, exploring the field of written language and type design I remember feeling so intimidated when designing typefaces because of this overwhelming pressure that everything had to be *right*. I wasn't even sure where this pressure came from, it just seemed to loom over the process. I still was lacking good theory and *traditional knowledge* as a *foundation*.

When creating experimental typefaces with shapes that emerged from random tools or intuitive play, I found myself focusing more on the system than on legibility or readability. Yet, I couldn't escape the nagging question: Are these letters correct? Do they correspond properly to one another? That's how I got to know about the *Designing Type* book Caterina just mentioned, to get some kind of technical guidance. But instead of clarifying my work, it completely disrupted it. What started as a playful, experimental typeface, full of vivid and intuitive shapes, was transformed into a rigid, technical project.

I became obsessed with aligning every letter based on the book's guidance. It felt like I was forcing my

unique, self-created language into a system that dictated how things *should* be.

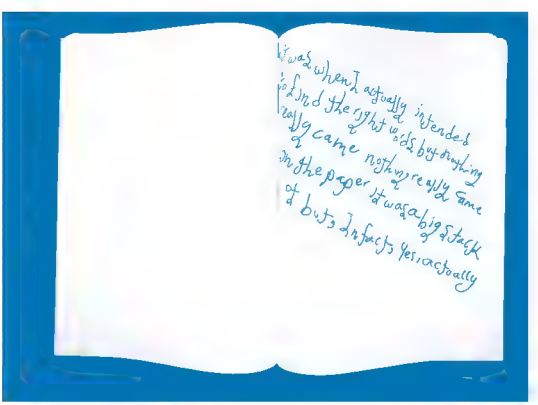
This experience made me reflect deeply on universality and its impact on creativity. It showed me how the drive to conform to established systems can strip a design of its original essence, turning it into something entirely different. This tension between creating your own language and trying to fit it into a pre-existing framework remains central to my thinking about typography.

PA: I want to talk about a project I initiated recently where I realised that type can be a symbol. This project (IMG 13 & 14) was made during a writing class at my school, not a typography class. This different perspective helped free me from the idea of *good type design* or to just understand my position in the field of type design a little better.

In the writing class my teacher, Phil Baber, introduced me to the possibilities of writing from notebooks. This was about translating one's notebook into a more edited text, or sometimes even leaving it untouched. This idea of translating one's notebook made me experiment a lot with my handwriting and how I write. How my handwriting is influenced by how I feel, and how writing by hand is always different from when I type on a computer.

I used to journal my days in one specific notebook, I have been doing it since I was 17. This A5 notebook had one constraint, I couldn't write more than a page. I would start on the top left corner and end on the bottom right corner. I would write in English because I was alienating

IMG 13
"I just
called
to
say
I miss you"
Typography as a symbol, research on handwriting. *@Parsa Abidi*


It was when I actually intended
to find the right words but nothing
really came nothing really came
on the paper it was a big stack
of but, In fact, actually

IMG 14
"It was when I actually intended
to find the right words but nothing
really came nothing really came
on the paper it was a big stack
of but, In fact, actually"
Typography as a symbol, research on handwriting. *@Parsa Abidi*

myself from my own culture while living in Iran. Although, I also just found it more dramatic and fun to journal in English.

Years later, back in the writing class I reappropriated the same method which was once discovered in my childhood bedroom. But this time I wrote slowly, with a focus not only on how I write, but how I feel when I write. By doing that I reduced my text to a sentence per page. And enlarged the sentence to fit an A3 sized paper. I had an intention and my intention was to write calligraphically. In a way that I could feel every letter on the paper. By creating a non-existent calligraphy I tried to become influenced by Shekasteh Nastaliq (IMG 15) while writing. Shekasteh Nastaliq was often used for writing prose and poetry where the language was hard to decode or to be read out loud. I embraced a highly personal approach to my hand writing where I weave poetry, quotations, and letters, words together.

Even in this script, with all its experimental qualities, there are still rules. But for this project, I intentionally worked against them, not just the typography rules, but the conventions of writing itself. I think I subverted many norms through this work.

And then there's this idea of inaccessibility, of the script being almost untouchable, sacred. That's something I found compelling, too. Once exclusive and revered, this calligraphic tradition has now become embedded in the everyday language of my life.

Through the writing process of my project, I changed the language from Farsi to English be-

IMG 15
Shekasteh Nastaliq calligraphy, Calligraphy Museum of Iran.
@Wikipedia. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

cause I wanted it to be understood by those who couldn't read Farsi. I wrote a sentence per A3 paper which allowed me to experience unlimitedness. I then turned this project into a publication format called *Single-page texts*. It was a very interesting discovery because I was always struggling to place myself in the typographic world. My handwriting is very chaotic. And so I started looking at writing as a form of painting. Once I chose this perspective it opened up a totally different view on writing and language, how there are all these breaks in the language. When one sentence finishes, another one can start, but you are not obliged to continue the same sentence. It's like creating bravery or creating confidence with writing in a script.

IK: I admire what you said about calligraphy being a way to *free* type, because, in a way, type is just an efficient method of writing designed for typesetting, one that is made to be mass-produced or printed. It originally came from calligraphy, right? If you look at the history of type development, calligraphy was once seen as an exclusive craft.

My handwriting is sloppy and often criticised. When I was at school, my teacher wouldn't even evaluate my work because she couldn't read what I had written. It felt like a punishment, my grades would be lowered just because of my handwriting. My father, who's a jewellery maker with very fine drawing and writing skills, used to say my writing looked like a chicken trying to write with its paw.

Now I realise that my *sloppy* handwriting actually played a big part in how I relate to both written language and typography. This perspective helped me

understand my position in relation to typography because traditional Western academic type design is rooted in the idea of calligraphy, particularly the theory of Gerrit Noordzij, who argues that type design should be based on the fine strokes of calligraphy.

That's why I was intrigued by what you said about writing being a tool to define how language looks. It's about finding a voice in those messy, imperfect strokes and thinking about how language is represented visually.

BETWEEN COLLECTIVE AND SOLITARY

IK: I want to elaborate a little bit about type design as a social practice. How do you envision *collaborative work* as a graphic designer, typographer, or generally as a practitioner? Could you share a little bit of your experience working in this way?

CS: I've always worked individually, due to how things are taught in Italy. The education system there is very individualistic, even when you work in a team everyone has their own specific role, usually tied to a brand or an organisation. Similarly, type design is often a solitary job. We typically work remotely, so collaboration is rare, and each designer has their own project. The only major collaborative experience I had was while working on the SEGOE typeface for Microsoft, a massive project led by Petr van Blokland studio, TYPETR. Even then, though, everyone had their own *garden,* focusing on their specific tasks.

When I started shifting toward a more artistic practice, I became interested in

exploring cross-contamination and collaborative processes. That's when I began collaborating with other people, which led me to notice two different ways of working together. I think this distinction is particularly important in the Netherlands, especially within the realm of micro-practices, funding structures, and open calls.

PA: I would like to mention my collaboration with Niam Madlani[99] (IMG 16). Niam and I connected on how we both see language as a performative act. We notice a lot of differences between languages, but we're also interested in finding the common ground. For us, language itself is a form of performance. With *Bitter Tongues,*[100] our intention is to amplify voices of resistance. We hope to provoke a fruitful resonance of drama and discourse; to question the role of politics and language(s) not only in our city, but also in our imaginations. We have often seen the way a voice can be folded, forcefully funnelled and fractured to fit a false form. We would like to provide a

IMG 16 & 17
On the left: Parsa Abidi and Niam Madlani at Bitter Tongues 2, held at Rietveld Sandberg library, March 2025. *@Eva Fiume*
On the right: S*an D. Henry-Smith at Bitter Tongues 1, held at Rietveld Sandberg library, April 2024. *@Catalina Reyes Navarro*

space for individuals and collectives to gain ownership of their own culture(s) and artistic voice.

Given the urgencies within our institutional bodies, a deterioration of Trans rights, and a growing manipulation of queer capital we would like to facilitate a vocal space, not just the sonic, but the deep recoil of a tongue's tenacity. We feel there is a need for this bitter space within everybody. We've hosted multidisciplinary artists that work with language such as: S*an D. Henry-Smith, Cleo Tsw, Nour Ben-Saïd, Jumana Azzam, Emma Ajdari & others (IMG 17).

IMG 18
Belastingdienst blauwe envelop
(Belastingdienst blue envelope). *@Inna Kochkina*

A COUNTRY OF LETTERS AND LETTERS OF A COUNTRY

IK: How does the lack of individuality and cultural diversity in official documentation, such as legal and universal documents like the Declaration of Human Rights, manifest in contemporary typography and type design?

PA: Living in the Netherlands as an expat means receiving letters every week or two. Whether it will be a tax bill (IMG 18), water bill, correspondence regarding your immigration status, or even the lottery. It's a very letter-based country, and they work with really nice paper. And if you

receive a letter from the tax office, it's usually a thicker paper. If you receive it from the city hall, it's a different paper. And the text is sometimes one-sided, sometimes two-sided. It's a very specific bureaucratic language that I have never experienced before. And sometimes it's really definitive: *"You have time until now to show this, to upload these documents."* Some are really threatening or immediate. It's well typeset. The way they place the paragraphs makes you enjoy reading it. But at the same time, every time I receive a letter, I am confronted with fear or anxiety. What is inside? It's not a pleasant feeling. Yet, they typeset these documents to make them look orderly, as if that would make a difference. Going through the process of becoming Dutch, and before that, applying to become Dutch, I felt this to the extreme. At some point, I realised I needed to keep my letters, my governmental letters, so I began collecting them. I had this growing pile of documents that I couldn't let go of. I was afraid: what if the Dutch government suddenly brought something up, and the proof was in one of these letters? So I archived them all. At one point in my Dutch residency, things felt precarious. My ability to stay here was uncertain. I couldn't risk losing a single piece of paper.

But later, when I no longer had to fear losing them, I decided to turn them into a project (IMG 19). I brought the entire archive to class and laid it all out. People were confused, why did I have so many papers? But they were all just A4s, standard government letters. And I realised: this is my understanding of graphic design. I've been engaged

with it for years now, receiving and navigating these letters constantly.

Working on this project felt sort of freeing or liberating. I committed to this document. I started writing in the language of the documents. Writing about myself. I like trying to explain myself in numbers, dashes and question marks. There is a lot of punctuation in this style of documentation. I turned it into an A3 book, and in the end I decided to throw away the originals.

IMG 19
Publication about documents, formal letters and immigration.
@Parsa Abidi

IK: In your book do you also interconnect the Dutch paperwork with Iranian paperwork?

PA: I was comparing the documents I had from the past. And now. I was looking at my diplomas. So my collection of documents was not only from during my immigration process but also from before. Because I had to take all these documents to the embassy again. So all of my documents, including my diplomas, high school diplomas, identity cards... and translations of them all. Everything had to be sent to a specific place. This place (bureaucratic institution) would then receive and stamp it in order for it to become

official again. Everything then has to go to the embassy. So from then on I already started collecting the letters and documents. Later, I had the ingrained understanding that your documents are important, and you need to take good care of them and keep them somewhere safe.

IK: I'm also thinking about my experience of immigration in the context of paperwork. The formal paperwork in Russia is usually partially or fully handwritten. Half is typeset with blank spots to fill in by hand. Once, I had to travel back to Russia to obtain a new birth certificate, which needed to be certified with an apostille stamp for recognition abroad. Such a procedure wouldn't be possible in the embassy or the consulate, so to obtain this document I had to travel back all the way to the city archive where I was born. This specific experience made me understand that the process of obtaining documents is about time, bureaucracy, authenticity and, not always pleasant, social interactions. First, I had to wait in the line of the dark dusty Soviet corridors, then I had to engage with the administrative worker, building a sort of social relationship, and who then suddenly decides to go for a meeting or a break prolonging the waiting time for an uncertain period or giving a quick favour to someone who cut the line for a *quick thing*. You then have to decide whether to wait patiently or interact with them to move things along. Sometimes it's a very long queue, or they might be on a sudden lunch break. However, there's a lot of personality in these exchanges. The format of the paperwork itself suggests a human connection and relationship behind it, not always a pleasant one, but it makes me think about how circumstances, structures, and human exchang-

es influence the design and format of documents. Do you notice anything like this in Iranian paperwork?

PA: My Persian documents contain a lot of handwriting whilst *significant* documents like my diploma are printed on glossy paper. Perhaps that's worldwide. But in this book I made, most of my documents are from the Netherlands not from Iran. But the binding of the translated documents is really interesting. It resembles a stack of papers with a distinctive fold. This fold makes it unique, similar to official documents. There was just a fold with a sticker on it, which gave it the appearance of a formal translation, legitimisation. It's the small details like that that really stood out to me.

LANGUAGE THAT BELONGS

IK: Portraying individuality, of course, goes against this universality that's already embedded in type design to make language as universal and standardised, as efficient as possible. Type design is, in a sense, meant to be a visual representation of our language, yet language itself is incredibly diverse. How, in your opinion, does typography serve as a medium to express individuality, and how can it capture the diversity of voice and language?

PA: Artistic expression within typography is not something typically taught in design schools. Instead, typography is often presented as a neutral tool for reading through text, guided by established rules. However, I believe there's a precious moment when you move beyond these rules and create your own personal meaning with typography. That's something you have to do for yourself,

and I think it brings typography closer to an art. Typography, as you mentioned, is made by hand, and it carries the continuation of a handcrafted element. It starts as an individualistic effort, but once you realise your own connection to it, it transforms into something more collective.

CS: I previously mentioned Karen Cheng's book, it made me think about our Western drive for standardisation, which, throughout history, has also led to the Latinisation of other scripts through Western printing technologies. The introduction of scripts by missionaries standardised richer shapes within pre-existing scripts and sounds; while other symbolic and oral systems became marginalised. In this way, we can clearly see how Western typography had quite an active role within colonialism: being used as a means to standardise, or even erase, rather than giving a flexible tool to diverse cultures. This is what missionaries had been doing while, for instance, importing printing machines to Canada from Belgium to print Christian chants in the natives' scripts (Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics, in this case). As the article *Syllabics Typographic Guidelines and Local Typographic Preferences*[101] explains, *"this style was primarily used by French Catholic missionaries in Western Canada, who were importing their printing equipment from France, with their type being supplied from Brussels."* By twisting and rotating its lettershapes, or mixing them with Latin letters, they left aesthetical

choices that solidified in time and that were led by printing techniques' times, costs, and mechanical limits.

Nowadays, the lack of individuality and expression in type design follows the necessities of a market, where you *need* a grotesque font or a text font in your foundry's collection to sell and maximise profit. You can see that the most successful typefaces in the end are always grotesque fonts that differ from each other by a few units.

While I was studying, different professionals told me that you design display fonts to attract graphic designers to the foundry, while knowing that they will most probably buy your most standardised typefaces that probably resemble Times New Roman or Arial. Another example of this that comes to my mind could be the revival of antique typefaces that I often see showcased at type conferences.

Currently, I'm reading about queer theories. And with me being non-binary and being raised in a country in which everything is gendered as masculine and feminine, I often wonder about what a language (and, therefore, my perception) would look like in a post-binary world. Universality comes close to this vision, but it holds many questions, especially in practice.

What does it mean? Does it mean that we want something to be standardised?

And if we standardise, for instance, for accessibility, how will we do it this time?

Especially as the process of standardisation usually involves loss of individuality, loss of community, or loss of meaning.

And again, I was thinking back to how I think about gender and its multi-dimensionality. How it can contain multitudes and make space (also for its own absence), rather than erasing and/or summarising. When you asked about neutral typography, I immediately thought about neutrality in this way. Forms which are enriching and flexible, proactive even, rather than rigid and exclusionary. In this sense, there are collectives that are trying to push new solutions by introducing new glyphs or new ligatures for non-binary representations, like the collective *Bye Bye Binary.*[102]

Another thing I want to mention is the debate around gender-neutral language that is ongoing in Italy and beyond at the moment. It's slowly becoming more common to see the usage of the ə[103] (schwa) at the end of the word instead of using the extended masculine, or to not pronounce the last letter to comprehend multiple gender identities. It is joyful and encouraging to see this intersection of language and activism and how they march together.

The proposal is not yet officially recognised by traditional language consortia, and it will take time before it will be. But it's something very real and established within queer communities where we practise different forms and sounds of gender neutral

language (some non-binary people do prefer the *u* sound, whilst others the absence of it, or some the *schwa* sound). Overall, I see it being used more and more in public communications, exhibitions, etc. Beside not being misgendered being a basic necessity for many of us, practising and making identity visible through language helps us to show others that we exist and that there is also a typographical space to investigate and respect our queerness.

PA: In Farsi, there is no gender in the language, so growing up I never knew that language could be gendered. There was only one place that you could gender people and that's when you wrote an official letter and you stated the *sir* or *madam*.

IK: There is a similar practice with the Russian language as the masculine form is considered neutral, and universal = androcentric. I like this question Caterina posed or rather the presented idea that language goes hand in hand with activism. In this sense, language is not a static matter and this development or active fight over its form is very interesting to me. It makes me think of the example where Gender gaps[104] were introduced in the Russian newspaper DOXA that was initially run by students. It was very irritating for the public as there was a lot of criticism around the subject, but with time I see that the editors of the newspaper played with different forms of gender within language searching for *the right one* that would work for the reader. For example, DOXA currently uses a colon before the word ending to indicate the diversity of gendered declensions, while privileging the feminine form, likely because the masculine form is

generally considered the default in other contexts. For instance, take the word школьни:ц (shkolni:ts), which stands for *schoolgirl,* while школьник (shkolnik) refers to a *schoolboy,* the colon separates the root from the gendered ending, highlighting the variation and thus diversifying the language and discussions around diversity and inclusion of it.

And if I think about *The Trouble of All – a call for complicating 'universality',* similarly, during our workshops we developed a methodology of collective (re) writing, (re)defining, (re)viewing, and (re)making that shaped our perspective on universality, or, rather *pluriversality,* as well as the collective alphabet (open source typeface) used in this book. This technique poetically and literally draws a parallel with the concept of universality, which, when it comes to written language and typography, has often leaned toward uniformity. Think of a one-size-fits-all model dominated by major languages and colonial aesthetics. Like the examples that I mentioned earlier with the standards and history of dominant scripts imposed on native or other scripts, such as the influence of Latin over Cyrillic, or similarly how Cyrillic script influenced Tatar, Bashkir or Mongolian (Cyrillic) scripts (IMG 20, 21, 22, 23 & 24) with such a distinguished history intersecting with its inherent religion and history.

Through this process we approach typography not as a purely technical discipline, but as a collective and social practice. Just as language evolves through dialogue, critique, and personal expression, the alphabet, handwriting, and script also reflect diversity and dynamism through their distinct characteristics. And just like an absolutely unreadable typeface corresponds with one's *bad* handwriting, it serves as a marker of

IMG 20, 21, 22, 23 & 24
Masthead of Буряад-Монголон унэн Buryat-Mongolian newspaper *Buryad Ünen* in Mongol Bichig, 1925, and it's gradual Cyrillization by 1968. *Original selection was made by Inna Kochkina for @thinking_in_english. 27 November 2024*

authenticity, personal identity, and holds a sense of legitimacy that comes from the hand of an individual portraying imperfections and character. Similarly, an unreadable typeface disrupts the expectation of clear communication, but, in doing so, it raises questions about the rigidity of legibility[105] standards. Both forms push back against the idea that clarity and uniformity are the ultimate goals of written language, instead emphasising the expressive, personal, and even resistant qualities that can be embedded in script.[106] These disruptions remind us that communication is not solely about efficiency, I think it is also about the nuanced ways in which identity, intention, and context shape the written word.

By shaping our alphabet through collective efforts we poetically create space for what is often excluded from the so-called *universal* voice. In this sense, our practice consciously challenges the conventions of traditional type design, which are deeply rooted in Western design methodologies. Together, we engage in this evolving conversation, sometimes adopting new conventions, sometimes resisting them, and often negotiating meaning along the way.

A SIDENOTE TO A COUNTRY OF LETTERS AND LETTERS OF A COUNTRY

IK: Following on from this conversation, I read an article by Soulaf Khalifeh's entitled *What if Arabs Had Invented the Printing Press*, which made me reflect on the duality of the terms Latin-non-Latin or, even more so, Cyrillic-non-Cyrillic, which I have eagerly used to discuss the focus of my research and the phenomenon of domination in script and typography.

During this interview, I became even more con-

fronted by the use of these terms as it creates a binary where the first term is the dominant one. However, I use it precisely for that reason, to highlight this dominance and underline how all the oppressed languages are placed into a non-something box.

In my recently published book and research on the Cyrillic script *Cyrillic Archives: One Shape of the Language* (IMG 25 & 26), I examine the domination of one script over a large group of other scripts and languages, both small and large, by forcibly introducing Cyrillic into their writing systems and imposing it onto their phonetic structures. This process erased indigenous writing traditions and embedded colonial power into typography itself.

In the case of Cyrillic, I also explore the religious and cultural connotations carried within its style, which is strongly tied to Slavic culture. For example, typefaces based on traditional calligraphic writing, once used for religious texts, were later used to mark land, towns, or villages in Muslim-populated regions of Russia. The same typefaces were also used on maps of colonised Siberia, demonstrating how typography extends beyond communication into territorial and ideological inscription.

When Cyrillisation took place in the Soviet Union, a large group of scripts from different cultural or religious origins, such as the Arabic script used for Turkic languages like Tatar, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Bashkir, as well as Mongol Bichig, were forcibly converted to Cyrillic. Even languages that had previously not used a script at all were assigned a Cyrillic-based one. These adaptations included small modifications, such as the invention of special characters and diacritical marks to represent phonetic sounds considered *difficult* or

IMG 25 & 26
Cyrillic Archives: One Shape of the Language
@Inna Kochkina (San Serriffe, Amsterdam, 2025)

unusual within the Cyrillic system. Yet, despite these tweaks, they all inherited the fundamental structure and appearance of modern Cyrillic script.

To explain the term modern or neutral Cyrillic, I refer to grotesque-style Cyrillic, which is used for the mass production of literature. Typography is a powerful medium that carries within itself a *herstory* and reflects the events, time, and socio-political atmosphere in which it is created. When we speak of the neutrality of typography in this context, we erase the diversity of languages and scripts, forcing them into templates designed for Latin-based, so-called neutral typefaces.

Even though, in my text, I use this duality with disdain for the dominant term to contrast it with the large number of affected scripts and critique the hierarchy, these terms, even when used critically, risk reinforcing the dominance of the first category. The danger is that the dominant script continues to be positioned as the default, while everything else remains defined by what it is not.

It is precisely this tension that brings me back to the question: what does *universal* actually mean? Is universality some sort of abstract, neutral, transcultural code that truly encompasses everything, or is it a defined standard that positions itself as a model, implying that others fall short of being *universal enough?*

92
Fanni, M., Flodmark, M., & Kaaman, S. *(2020). The Natural Enemies of Books: A Messy History of Women in Printing and Typography. London, United Kingdom: Occasional Papers.*

93
Kochkina, I. *(2024). Cyrillic Archives: One Shape of the Language. Amsterdam, Netherlands: San Serriffe.*

94
By grotesque, I refer to the group of typefaces developed and introduced in Western Europe during the Industrial Revolution in the early 19th century. Grotesque typefaces, also known as sans serif, are characterised by the absence of serifs at the ends of strokes. In these typefaces, the horizontal and vertical strokes are typically similar or relatively close in weight, giving them a more uniform and mechanical appearance compared to serif typefaces.

95
When I use the term typography, I refer to the way we visualise, arrange, and typeset written language, not only from an aesthetic perspective but also a functional one.

96
A typeface is a set of designed characters such as letters, numbers, and punctuation halt together form a cohesive system of glyphs, designed to work harmoniously as a unified visual language.

97
The Stroke: Theory of Writing by Gerrit Noordzij serves as a foundational text in Western type design theory, outlining how the discipline is rooted in the traditions and structures of calligraphy.

98
Shekasteh Nastaliq (Persian: شکسته نستعلیق, *cursive Nastaliq* or literally *broken Nastaliq)* is a streamlined form of the Nastaliq script. Its development is connected with the increasing use of Nastaliq and the need to write it more quickly, which led to a process of gradual simplification. Shekasteh Nastaliq first appeared in the early seventeenth century. It differed from classical Nastaliq mainly in that some letters were reduced in size and detached letters or words were sometimes joined. These unconventional connections allowed calligraphers to write Shekasteh more quickly than any other script. Manuscripts from this early period show the influence of Shekasteh Ta'liq. While they resemble a condensed form of Nastaliq, they also retain features of Ta'liq because many of the scribes who created them had originally been trained in that tradition. Shekasteh Nastaliq, often shortened to Shekasteh, gradually replaced Ta'liq as the script used for decrees and documents. Over time, it also came to be used for writing prose and poetry.

99
Niam Madlani is a graphic designer and writer, who works with multi-script typefaces and explores various aspects of language and typography.

100
Bitter Tongues is a series of events focused on politics and language, initiated by Parsa Abidi and Niam Madlani.

101
Syllabics Typographic Guidelines and Local Typographic Preferences. Kevin King for Typotheque *https://www.typotheque.com/articles/syllabics-typographic-guidelines.*

102
Læ Queer Unicode Initiative (QUNI), *https://typotheque.genderfluid.space/fr/quni.*

103
In the 2020s, the schwa (ə) has seen some usage in the Italian language, replacing the gendered suffixes of the language in order to keep words gender neutral: for example, the use of the schwa in the word tuttə (all/everyone), as opposed to tutti (all/everyone, masculine plural).

104
Gender gaps are used to highlight the diversity of genders represented behind the word.

105
Legibility here means the *quality* of a text that makes it easy to read.

106
Script here means a writing system that represents a particular language.

EVERYTHING IS WRONG OK WHICH RULES RULE WHICH RULES RULE MASCULINE WHICH RULES RULE WITHOUT A MUTUAL MASCULINE ADJECTIVES NATIONALITY WITHOUT A MUTUAL GENDER GRACE SOCIO GRACE REST WHICH ONE IS MORE WRONG WHICH SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND WHICH ONE IS MORE WRONG WHAT ARE THE RIGHTS OF MY PHYSICAL BODY MOST OF THE RIGHTS ARE WRONG WITHOUT DISCRIMINATION WHO ESTABLISHED THEM WANT TO KNOW WRONG WRONG ASYLUM MOVEMENT CAN BE WRONG ASYLUM WHAT IF WE CANNOT MOVEMENT CAN BE WRONG OF WHAT IS WORTH WOULD BE MORE SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO LEAVE AND THERE WOULD BE LESS WRONG AND THERE WOULD BE LESS WRONG WONDER WITHOUT FEELING WONDER WITHOUT FEELING WONDER WITHOUT FEELING WHO GETS WELCOMED IN A WESTERN IDEA OF COUNTRY WELL WHOLE WORLD WHOLE IN WESTER IDEOLOGY MOST IMPORTANT RIGHTS FOR LIVING A WORLD CAN BE WRONG MENTIONED MOVED AWAY FROM MERIT WHAT ELSE CAN BE QUESTIONABLE WRONG QUESTIONABLE WHAT ELSE CAN BE QUESTIONED NOW THE DUALITY MEN PEOPLE MONEY THE DUALITY PEOPLE MERIT MEN PEOPLE THE DUALITY PEOPLE ME PROPERTY ME PROPERTY MONEY PROPERTY MERIT THE DUALITY MARY THE PROPERTY MONEY MONEY PROPERTY DOCUMENTS PEOPLE ME ME DOCUMENTS THE ATMOSPHERE AND ANIMALS THE ARTS THE TOUCH THE ARTS PLEASURE PLEASURE GUARANTEE RESPONSIBILITY OUR RESPONSIBILITY OR AUTHENTICITY OR ENTHUSIASM OR COMMUNITY OR AUTHENTICITY TO PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY NON HIERARCHICAL SITUATION IDEA WHY SO MUCH WORK NOT HIERARCHICAL SITUATION WHY FOCUS ON SO MUCH WORK BUT FOR WHO IS THERE MAYBE IS THERE MAYBE JUST WHAT REST WHAT REST A

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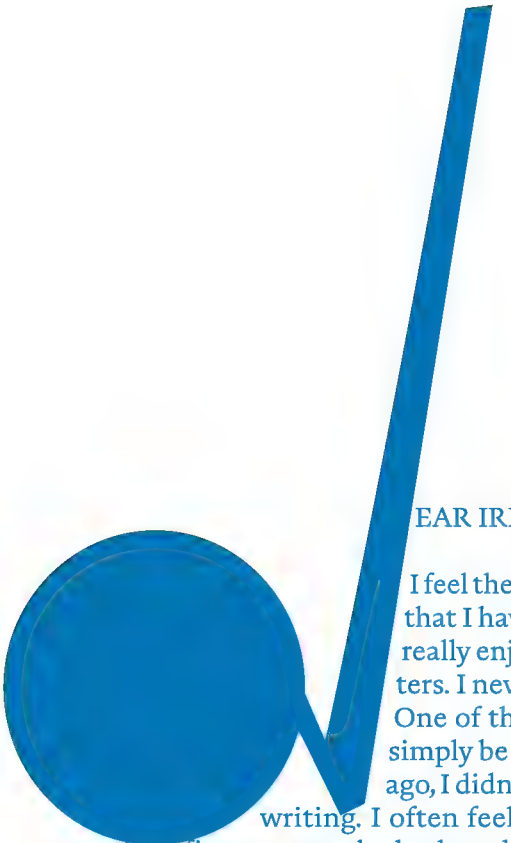
DANCE OF RESPONDING

a correspondence on learning and teaching together

ELISA PIAZZI, INNA KOCHKINA,
& IRINA SHAPIRO



EAR IRINA,

I feel the need to mention that I have actually never really enjoyed writing letters. I never had a pen-pal. One of the reasons might simply be that, until a year ago, I didn't think I enjoyed writing. I often feel as if words slip out of my fingers onto the keyboard (or the paper) in ways that do not match my emotions. They never take the same shape as my thoughts. I am only now coming to the realisation that writing is, for me, a way of understanding and processing my feelings rather than merely portraying them. And I am starting to embrace this process more and more as a way of healing, discovery, and learning.

I have a good feeling about this correspondence. First of all, because it is shared between me, Inna (who I trust will step in for me when/if I get lost) and you, Irina. And secondly, because with this correspondence I hope to reflect on the pedagogical value of the workshops we have hosted in the context of our project *The Trouble of All*.

We decided to approach this exchange by writing about the impossibilities and limitations of our pedagogical actions, as I believe that talking through struggle from the perspective of fragility and vulnerability will make this correspondence a space for recognition. Last year, I had a talk with practitioner Lenn Cox[107] during which she told me *"Let's be unprofessional, let's be humans."* I think being human is exactly what we are trying to *be* during this correspondence.

I am writing this letter in reflection on the first workshop that Inna and I organised together at the *Wijkcentrum Bezuidenhout West* in The Hague. These workshops were, for us, a way of collectively making sense of the current global, political climate. By reading, re-writing and questioning the UDHR during the workshops, we used the Declaration of Human Rights to expose *universality* as an ideology of conformity that turns differences into sameness in order to dominate them. We firmly believe that by engaging diverse voices and viewpoints, we can avoid repeating past mistakes and foster richer, more inclusive outcomes. Through this correspondence, we hope to reflect on what it means to create a *safe space*[108] in which universal rights can be openly discussed.

We want to understand how to better manage uncertainty when organising public events with open invitations, as we did for this last workshop. We be-

lieve that such an approach can bring together a diverse group of participants capable of generating rich (and hopefully challenging!) discussions around the concept of universal rights. However, when preparing for the workshop, this openness presented a number of practical challenges: How many people will come? Will there be only adults? Kids? Will they speak English or Dutch? And how can we create a space for mutual understanding where everyone can feel safe? An *open-mic* where all voices can be (and want to be) heard? Is it possible to accommodate so much diversity? Is there anything that can be planned ahead with so many uncertainties?

In theory, diversity is a necessary condition for universality – or better *pluriversality.* But how do we translate theory into real action in the physical space of the workshop? Are there some physical conditions or practical solutions that will allow for us to find unity within diversity?

> *"Dialogue can not exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people."*[109]
>
> PAULO FREIE

Could then a shared *will to make things better* be enough? Going back to theory and ideals, we hope this work will contribute to the creation of a *world in which it will be easier to love.* But how can we share this with participants?

Another challenge we faced with open invitations was that they were sometimes too broad, meaning the language and terminology used did not land with *anyone.* This was the case for this workshop: most participants came from my own network, and were

IMG 27 & 28
Documentation of re-writing workshop at Wijkcentrum
Bezuidenhout West, June 2024, The Hague *@Elisa Piazzi*

international, young, and working in the creative field. Many were friends. While I was somewhat disappointed that we did not attract a broader audience, I was grateful for the intimate and welcoming atmosphere they helped create, as it made it much easier for us to create a safe space.

I have many questions as I write and reflect on this. How can we attract a more diverse group for the next workshop? How can we reach beyond the creative community? How can I do this when I, myself, feel like a guest in this country, and do not speak the language? Perhaps next time we should consider targeting a more specific group.

(NOTE FROM INNA) I experienced some sort of comfort and perhaps felt more confidence once I found out that we would only be working with people with whom Elisa has a close connection. This is a very different feeling from what I usually experience when I enter a *classroom* with an entirely new group of people. Comfort also comes from understanding that we speak *the same language* and come from a similar background. Besides a slight disappointment that we didn't manage to engage

the *locals,* I enjoyed the chance of working with a public I was comfortable with and decided to give a broader introduction to my practice and my part in this project, thinking it was more relevant for this audience.

It is also important to mention that we invited a very broad public of all ages and types. Thus, as I understood later, people didn't feel as if they were addressed; it was as if everyone was no one. We had to be way more specific about who we wanted to work with. This leads me to leave the workshop with the main question: how do we engage with local residents?

I also noticed the embedded hierarchies in this situation, more evident since most participants are acquaintances or friends. I was the *host* and they were *participants*. They read, wrote, drew, thought... I waited, observed, and planned. Inna, on the other hand, was reading, writing, drawing, and thinking too. She appeared to be both a host and a participant. Next time, should I be doing this too? I wanted to.

This situation reminds me of Paulo Freire's concept of *the radical*. *"This person is not afraid to meet the people or enter into dialogue with them.(...) This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side."*[110]

Should I have been a participant, too? Or should I have left the room? How would that have affected the workshop? I wanted to be a facilitator, but this role is intrinsically variable. Each situation requires different facilitation methods. Sometimes I even question if a

facilitator is necessary. Could a paper with instructions suffice? There will be no hierarchies then... but perhaps they will be formed later on. Is my role then to control? Anti-facilitate the formation of hierarchies?

> **(NOTE FROM INNA)** After reading Elisa's notes, I recall my thoughts and feelings of discomfort after we introduced ourselves and the project. We handed out the assignment, and the group started engaging with the Declaration and re-writing it. Meanwhile, I questioned myself: What do we do now? Sit and watch? I did that before, and it didn't make me feel comfortable, as this creates so much distance between me and the group, I feel like some sort of a teacher waiting for students to finish their assignment in order to evaluate. Joining the re-writing session gave me a sense of comfort, but more importantly it made me feel that our work was about finding horizontality, not to teach, not to preach but to inhabit the practice, become part of the collective effort.

As I am letting my thoughts flow, I have another doubt. If I can't break embedded hierarchies with my friends, how can I do that with strangers? Perhaps some hierarchies are unavoidable, even valuable.

Can radical horizontality be too radical? Not in the context of this project, no.

Relating this back to our aim – reshaping universal rights – horizontality is a necessity. If we are criticising the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for its rigidity and for its bottom-down creation we can't but try to make this as horizontal a process as possible.

Once we started making and printing, these embedded hierarchies shifted. *"Elisa can we get another paper?" "Elisa we need more water!"* I was assisting, I wasn't *superior* – perhaps I was even less important in that moment as I was not part of their creative process. Making things not only facilitated conversation but also balanced the hierarchies I felt earlier. And perhaps, if we had to make a mathematical calculation it would bring us down to 0 hierarchies? This is just a speculation.

In this sense, making together became what Tim Ingold calls a *correspondence* – an ongoing movement of answering and being answered, where people and materials co-constitute each other through the process. Rather than directing or controlling, I was *becoming with* the group and the materials, as part of an emergent, shared field of action.[111]

I am leaving you with these questions, doubts, and reflections hoping you can help me navigate them. Sorry if some thoughts seem far-fetched, but I am *excitable,* and writing this letter has opened a door I'm not ready to close.

Looking forward to writing back to you,

ELISA AND INNA

DEAR ELISA, DEAR INNA,

I am writing this letter much later than expected due to the intensity of work (and life) in the last months. It's a reoccurring part of the teaching job, perhaps any job, when things are not going according to plan and accumulate into an unexpected wave of self-doubt and reflection. This is okay, but it takes time and the energy away from what would be needed to dive into the conversation you kindly invited me into, on the fundamental matters of practice.

Engaging in a format of correspondence is somewhat liberating. It's an interruption of a writing habit I developed in the art education environment, *suspecting* the meanings and roots behind each word to translate my thoughts, leaving not much for naivety or the simplicity of human conversation. Right now, I am writing with the hope of being allowed to trace my thoughts with an (unavoidable) ambiguity. I also hope you trust in my genuine intentions as I share my practice honestly. Of course, I am thinking with the voices of other practitioners, students, and colleagues, which I acknowledge mainly in the notes. However, I prefer to speak from personal experience, preventing generalisations; although it's hard to avoid them.

The Trouble of All – a call for complicating 'universality' appears to me like a generous space to slow

down and complicate engagement with the text and the questions surrounding the UDHR. As you have a specific question about creating a learning (or even an *unlearning*) space to discuss universal *rights,* before going further, I need to clarify that my practice is not concentrating on *rights* or *declarations.* However, my heart beats faster when thinking about learning – the emergence of meaning in the process of relating to *others* (whether it's another living being, non-living material or environment). Addressing the troubles that usually accompany this process is how I read your invitation to respond to the pedagogical aspects of the project as a practitioner involved in art education.

Caught off guard by a student peer evaluation in a class, I asked my colleague Sjoerd Westbroek to witness my self-doubt and help me navigate the best way to bring my seminar to a close. *"That's teaching, right? You want to do A, and then B happens."* Sjoerd wrote to me. I continued: *"Yes... the road between A and B is for teaching to steer, deviate, or get lost to remain relevant to one's meaning-making process. No?" "That is nicely put."* Sjoerd concluded this conversation while offering me a much-needed line of support.

Sjoerd and I have been working together at the Master Education in Arts for eight years.[112] This programme is a part-time study, meaning that our students are working professionals: art educators, and mediators from diverse backgrounds, such as primary schools, higher art education institutions, or individuals involved in public pedagogy. It's a privilege (and a challenge) as I find myself in a classroom with 8-15 colleagues grappling with complex and ambiguous aspects of teaching, engaging with perspectives from highly varied contexts.

One might be surprised that regardless of the surrounding expertise and building up of my teaching experience, I did not manage to organise *learning* in a less doubtful and more controllable way. I try to be very pragmatic here in revisiting my pedagogical decisions. Can I make my work easier for myself and make it feasible within the hours I am allocated? Each time I engage in such internal debates, I conclude (rather liberatingly) that there is not much I can do to make the process more predictable if I follow my navigation compass of honesty.

There are reasons for that. First of all, I am not focusing on creating learning environments and guidelines[113] that attempt to *explain meaning* to students. My practice is attracted more to learning as an invitation to *illuminate a meaning* relevant to specific learners at a specific moment in time. The outcome of a learning activity I am hoping for is not a *reproduced meaning* but a *reinterpreted* one – a meaning that is formulated by each learner in their own way. In my belief, such ability to form a response allows learners to act beyond sustaining their professional or social bodies. It helps them to gain agency in relating to *knowledges*: to think of their own *initiations* and *responses* so that others can create *new beginnings* in understanding something.[114] This process of meaning-making, or learning, is entangled with others who are responding to, shaping, or limiting their reinterpretations and initiations. In other words, these *new beginnings* happen in a confluence and do not exist in solitude.[115]

This mediation position – or what I would simply call *teaching* – is a practice of seeking something new and *other* to emerge and land in a group. The trouble,

in my contemplation of more predictable teaching, lies in a contradiction of expectations: we expect a teacher to work towards *universal* outcomes, yet simultaneously be inclusive of the plurality and equality of learners' emerging responses. Perhaps this resonates with your goals to complicate the notion of *universality* as it stands.

As the engine of stimulating students' *new beginnings* starts to operate, it becomes challenging (and, needless to say, contradictory to my teaching intentions) to exert control over, and direct the emerging process into a structure that would fit all.[116] It's still tempting, though.[117]

In a classroom, while balancing the controllable with the uncontrollable, I often witness a tendency to rationalise the co-existence of the students' emerging responses and, therefore, make their inter-relation more calculable. There is a tendency towards a horizontal structure that gives everyone equal opportunities and conditions to participate. An example is a round of sharing opinions, where each participant has 3 minutes to express their thoughts or feelings. While equality of time and space enables every voice to be spoken, it does not guarantee that each has been heard and accepted in its *otherness*. There is relief that if everyone speaks equally, everyone has an equal say in supporting a plurality in a discussion or decision-making. Similarly, calculated measures in collaborative processes, such as the shifting of roles within collaboration, are intended to offer clarity and equality to mitigate further possible tensions. The challenge surpasses what a formal solution can facilitate; as one of my students coined those as: *"How do we engage with someone with ideologies/opinions so different from*

yours in class discussions? Is it possible to combine different age groups when we experience art in class?"

Writing this, I am thinking about a line of thought that my students recently offered as an image for the co-existence of pluralities in learning. It introduces a rather different optics of negotiating the collective space that allows differences. This was formulated by a group of 13 students who were asked to develop a learning activity with an invitation to a guest of their choice to discuss the issues in art education relevant to their practices. The students developed a dinner[118] with the title *A Seat at the Table,* in the description of which they phrased learning as the following: *"Etymologically, learning comes from the Latin 'im-parare' where 'parare' can be translated into preparing the table, to procure something. To learn means to set the table, a*

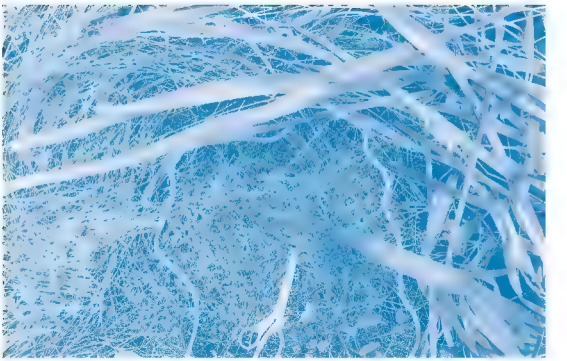
IMG 29 & 30
A Seat at the Table documentation
@Maite Vanhellemont

table where everyone brings something concerning their possibilities."

One can say the table's setup for sharing food has the very structure that I am looking for. There is some sort of standardisation of the procedures that acts as a safeguard of the expectations and processes. One could say it would solve my trouble and give me a framework for more efficient teaching. There is a problem, though. Not with the framework but with the conditions that would allow it to be more structurally involved in institutional knowledge production. It requires an openness towards the equality of *relations involved in knowledges* – no dominated expertise – and it's fundamentally different from the equality of *contributions* to knowledges.

A shared meal is possible due to the unequal roles (contributions) of a host, cook, and, let's say, guests. Some people spend the whole day preparing food, and some appear to be guests and put effort into eating. What interests me is that *unequal contributions* do not create a problem unless e*qually essential relations* to a moment of sharing food are acknowledged – to its joy, care, hospitality, gratitude and much more. Such a setting flourishes through the acceptance of inequality of *voices* (in the linguistic sense of the word), and allowance of the equality of unique *expertises* and *relations* to the shared meal.

If we apply this metaphor to learning, the table accommodates pluralities without measuring and comparing relations relying on standardised parameters: duration of someone's involvement, medium, and form of their input, etc. Specifically, the latter poses a challenge to learning (or knowledge production), as plurality among human beings is naturally



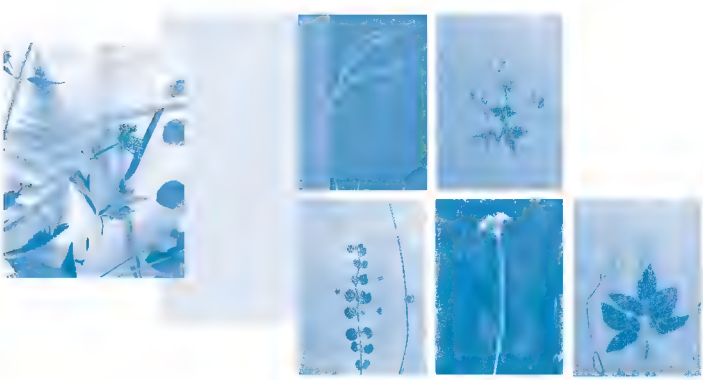
IMG 31
Witnessing Garden 404. Slow Mowing
and the resulting Herbarium. *@Irina Shapiro*

negotiated through language, a dominant tool for comprehending and sharing meanings. The rationality of language dominates education and the process of forming expertise. Dutch early education is a very good example, as it focuses on language development as the key to opening doors to higher education and further supporting the development of one's expertise. A student who can *win an argument* with a better-formulated, sharper, and more contextualised statement has higher access to a diversity of research and, therefore, much more confidence and choices in establishing their professional path.

In my classes, where university students collaborate with art students,[119] a lot has been done by our team and students to ensure that everyone commits to an *all voices equally spoken* atmosphere. Still, I witness again and again that a well-articulated prompt and response will always take the stage – it holds more influence, is better remembered, and is often referred back to. The voice that operates through body lan-

guage, imagery, and poetics may require more time, firstly, to search for a suitable form of existence and, secondly, to be comprehended by the listeners. And, it's a vulnerable process for the student who accepts the challenge and chooses this form of communication, a more ambiguous form of expression, with a higher chance of misunderstanding.

The interrelational options on the horizontality of those involved in learning, which I am writing about here, focus not on the equality of the manifestations but on the equality of their relevance for a specific meaning or knowledge (as an ecosystem). In conversations with my students, I keep bringing up an example from my own learning space, my garden.[120] There are many *experts* who form the garden in a much more fundamental way than I do. For example, *slugs*. We cannot really think of the equality of my expert contribution and the slug to the garden or the way we understand this environment. But we can build the



IMG 32
Witnessing Garden 404. Slow Mowing
and the resulting Herbarium. *@Irina Shapiro*

co-existence of our responses in the garden based on the equal importance of our *relations* to this space. Relationality cannot be simply organised by structural decisions or rely on standardised measures; it can be established in the connection to something we are dependent on. Here, I am thinking of this quote by Paulo Freie, which you mentioned in your letter: *"Dialogue can not exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people." (Paulo Freie in Pedagogy of the Oppressed).*

Such equality requires something rather difficult to become predictable in a classroom: equality of plural forms of knowing and the unlearning of expertise as a solitary pursuit. Furthermore, there is a need to establish some common ground regarding our co-dependence on *love* (coined by Paulo Freire) or *relationality,*[121] as Shawn Wilson, the author of *Research is Ceremony,* puts it: *"Knowledge, theories, and ideas are only knots in the strands of relationality that are not physically visible but are nonetheless real."*

Continuing to rely primarily on language-led manifestations of *knowledge, theories, and ideas* in building or restoring relationality is problematic, especially in times when we find ourselves in classrooms that gather extremely different literacies and cultural optics on language. It reminds me of a talk by Janet Chwalibog at ELIA Dialogue Series Higher Arts Education in Times of Conflict (2024), specifically reflecting on higher art education's response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She shared the struggle to engage in conversation with her students when some of them had no relation to the histories involved in the conflict. Janet pointed out that such discussions among the students and faculty require shared sen-

sitivity to the language in the current highly intercultural classroom. Can other-than-linguistic forms of dialogue help to facilitate discussions among differences? If so, what are the consequences for learning and education? How can we move to the learning mentality of relating to knowledge in the capacities (and therefore expertise) we have, without forcing ourselves into relating to the (universal) capacities we are expected to have?

These are the questions I am left thinking around horizontalities and structural proposals to facilitate them. Hope they resonate with you. Meanwhile, I am looking forward to your next letter.

IRINA

EAR IRINA,

First of all, thank you for your incredibly kind and thoughtful letter. It has brought us not only many valuable reflections but also energy, something which is necessary to continue with this long-term project, and more generally to start the new year.

I can't help but relate to your feelings towards the unpredictability of work (and life) especially as I write to you today, January 9th – a day of personal significance for me. A day which never goes by easily, where I am the most grateful and the most doubtful. I find comfort in knowing that I'm not alone in experiencing waves of ups and downs, clear, sunny days followed by confusing greyness, moments of intense clarity after deep questioning. I like to think of these waves as a reminder of our shared humanity. Something which allows us to grow and to constantly reflect on ourselves and the world around us. I once read *"it's both a blessing and a curse to feel everything so very deeply"* – I find reassurance in this sentence. For this reason, I'm especially grateful for the space we've created together. It's not always easy to find an honest place to openly share – both successes and failures, particularly in a professional context.

IMG 33
Walking in my father's clothes, self-published 2021
@Elisa Piazzi

I believe both Inna and I resonate deeply with your role as mediator (or teacher). At every step of this project, we are carefully balancing out our words, trying not to over- explain or define the concept of universality, but rather, as you so beautifully expressed, hoping to facilitate the *"emergence of a shared meaning of humanity in relation to others."*

I find the use of words such as *emergence* or *illuminate,* especially when followed by the word *meaning,* particularly compelling. I believe they somehow visualise the process of helping participants (or, in your case, students) gain agency in the meaning-making process, making it more tangible. This way of understanding the act of teaching emphasises the active role that participants play in the process of comprehension and interpretation.

During our workshops, we ask questions with the intent of showing a path (or a crossing?) that can (or can not) be followed. This is a process, which I believe, needs to happen through dialogue and collaboration. Participants do not just learn and understand in isolation, but together, engaging with each other's insights and interpretations, crossing one another's paths to eventually part once again. By taking an active role, participants feel empowered not only to

understand but also to shape the direction and purpose of the work they are involved in. I believe this is fundamental in our workshops.

Theoretically, this is our methodology and approach. However, I sometimes struggle with its practicalities – are we really applying it? You mention the temptation to direct the emerging process into a specific structure, and I wonder if our workshops might have been too structured at times. Especially in the context of artistic workshops, I find it hard to balance the *need for a specific outcome* – which is often tied to the artwork's agenda (and funding), whilst allowing for the uncontrollable and spontaneous to happen.

As I reflect on our second workshop (held at Page Not Found, The Hague), I want to address an issue I encountered with the content of our discussion. In this session, we chose to narrow the invitation down to a specific group. We focused on individuals from housing-insecure, immigrant, and migrant communities as both Inna and I are migrants/immigrants with first-hand experience navigating the housing market and dealing with the complexities of staying and functioning in a foreign country, each at differing levels. With this target group in mind, we aimed to lead a conversation centred on migration and housing insecurity. However, and because, discussing these rights alone doesn't fully address the complex socio-economic challenges tied to migration and housing insecurity, the conversation expanded to so many other rights to the point in which I am not so sure if housing and migration were the main focus of our conversation. What should my role have been in this situation? When trying to guide the conversation towards migration, was I trying to control the outcome too much?

I would also like to react to the metaphor of learning (and teaching) as a shared meal that you introduce in your letter. I want to thank you for helping me see that unequal contributions don't pose a problem if we embrace the equality of our individual differences. Having worked with the concept of universality and human rights for the past four years, I often find myself feeling *too prepared*. Let me clarify: I still feel there is so much more for me to learn (and understand) about human rights, but in the setting of a workshop, especially when I'm with participants who may not be as familiar with the topic, I sometimes worry that I'm taking over the conversation. This raises a question: how do I let go of what I know to make space for others' perspectives? As a facilitator, I feel the pressure to share my knowledge, but I'm trying to find a way to balance that role without overshadowing others.

Trying to answer this doubt, I want to reconnect to your reflections on the complexities of language-led dialogue, as the feeling described above is something I mostly feel during moments of collective (language-led) discussion. It is not a problem that arises in the practical moments of the workshop when we are *making* together.

The act of making is inherently relational as making is not just about producing something but about engaging in a continuous interplay of action, response, and adaptation. Whilst engaging with materials and our surrounding environment we can create a space where correspondence and connection with others become more intuitive and accessible. For these reasons during the workshops, we follow Tim Ingold's philosophy, creating *with* rather than *of*

or *on*. To quote: *"Everything has – or, better, is – the story of differentiation. Thus the story of a stone, a tree, or a mountain, like the story of a human being, is also the story of those things or beings that, over time, become other to it – the moss, the bird, the mountaineer."*[122] My question is, other than *making with*, are there other practical solutions we can adapt in our workshop to promote plurality? How do we learn a different way of listening?

As a non-native English speaker, I am extremely aware that not all voices are heard equally and how certain accents, or ways of speaking can struggle to gain recognition. Personally, I often struggle with my own accent (strongly Italian), but I hope that by embracing and showing this vulnerability, I can help foster a space where true listening happens – a space where different voices are valued for what they bring, not how well articulated they are. For this reason, our workshops not only include a hands-on moment of making but also encourage participants to express themselves in whatever way (language, drawing) feels most natural and comfortable to them. Practically speaking, English is the language we use during the discussions, but this choice is dictated only by the fact that English is the language we have in common. While writing this I am thinking of a workshop in which there are as many translators as languages, allowing everyone to express themselves as they prefer, adding another layer in the chain of interpretation – but this is me getting carried away again, so I will leave this unconcluded thought here.

Currently, we are trying to address and celebrate living in a symphony of languages through the creation of the collective typeface which is shaped by the

IMG 34 & 35
Documentation of re-writing workshop at Page Not Found,
August 2024, The Hague *@Ieva Maslinskaitė*

personal objects carried by participants. Perhaps this is just a first step towards a more attentive way of corresponding, but I still see it as a valuable and relevant part of our work.

Going back to the metaphor of the table and relating it to the workshop, I want to reflect on a question I noted during the workshop: When does the workshop start and end? I arrived a bit earlier to help Ola (one of the founders of PNF) to *set-up the table.* During this preparation time, we had a very interesting conversation about human rights and politics. It struck me that this informal exchange was as much a part of the workshop as the scheduled activities. Given the

convivial and fluid nature of our workshops, I often find it difficult to define clear boundaries. I think my best answer for now, is that the workshop is part of our continuous research, they blend into each other and they do not have a clear ending or beginning. This blurring of boundaries was particularly evident during the lunch break, where conversations continued in a personal and informal way. Even after the formal wrap-up session, the discussions carried on outside. Seeing how the workshop can be the catalyst of an evolving and living process, made me happy. Confident in the value of what we do. It made all the (often unpaid) working hours worth something more.

I want to conclude this letter with a practical note – working with a larger institution as a host for this workshop made things much easier, especially in reaching out to more participants. PNF shared the event on their social media and newsletter and handled the registration, which was a huge relief. Honestly, it's made me realise just how many administrative tasks go into this project, how much time I have spent on it. A conversation on all the administrative and organisational tasks that come before and after the workshop would be extremely interesting for me, but perhaps I am getting too broad here, once again.
Realising the non-linearity and length of this letter (already) I will stop here,

Thank you again, until next time,

ELISA

EAR ELISA, DEAR INNA,

I appreciate your invitation to stay with the trouble of pedagogical praxis, specifically, how to accomplish something inherently difficult, as answering your questions *"...other than making with, are there other practical solutions we can adapt in our workshop to promote plurality? How do we learn a different way of listening?"*[123]

Let me think through the context of art degree-based education and its assessment. Institutional assessment may be an abrupt departure in our conversation, given the formalities it entails. Still, the logic of assessment says a lot about the position of collective learning within academia. The learning journey involves a student navigating *two interwoven processes: socialisation, which accepts the 'we,' and subjectification – awakening the 'I'.*[124] The question concerns

the balance between those that would promote pluriverses. I witness a call for collaborative practices, yet evaluation remains dominated by an individual orientation. This culture is ultimately relevant to the future professional context of graduates from art academies – cultural or transdisciplinary practices of urgencies (I will come back to them later in this letter). There, I see overlap with the context within you position your workshops.

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa uses the term resonance to think through relating to and engaging with the other voices and meanings. He coins it as a *"capacity to feel affected by something, and in turn to develop intrinsic interest in the part of the world which affects us."* Although Rosa suggests reasonable conditions to establish such resonance, he alerts us from thinking instrumentally about it: *"resonance is not an echo - it does not mean to hear oneself amplified or to simply feel re-assured [...]."* He discusses the importance of being open to becoming affected; *to hear the call* of *"real 'other' that remains beyond our control, that speaks in its own voice."*[125]

This openness and trust in collective learning are challenged by the evaluation principles. If the primary method for assessing *resonance learning* relies on individual reflections, all of which must meet the same rigid criteria within the same timeframe to earn a positive academic record, then the system of standardisation and competition takes over. Ultimately, it redefines the entire process, altering the goals, values, and motivation to *learn in co-dependent relationships* with others toward *parallel learning among different individuals.*

Rosa recognises this co-dependency among learners essential for resonance: *"resonance [...] requires difference and sometimes opposition and contradiction in order to enable real encounter [...] that entails progressive, mutual transformation and adaptation. [...] The pervasive logic of competition in particular undermines the possibility of entering a mode of resonance – we cannot compete and resonate simultaneously."*[126]

I recognise that your project, *The Trouble of All - a call for complicating 'universality',* lies beyond many institutional nuances. Nonetheless, I ask you to stay with me, as you may recognise the influence of the individual-based, comparable attitude in learning, which does not conclude with obtaining a diploma but affects our understanding of meaning-making further.

Segregation and comparison are both prevalent in teaching practices, including my own, which, for instance, manifest in the challenge of assessing a collective work through individual reflections. I suspect the reason for this challenge lies in *guarding* professional qualifications and the institutional obligation, in order to *trace* whether the necessary qualities are demonstrated by each individual who receives a diploma under equal conditions for all students.[127] Reasonably so, for the sake of transparency of the procedures and fairness towards every individual's performance and authorship. An individual reflection will serve as the basis for assessing students, even if they worked collectively.

Tracing *collective qualities emerged in a resonance* in this logic becomes problematic. Similarly, in the evaluation models where students have a say; they can assign different points to various members of the group to acknowledge different levels of individual

contribution within a group. Or to *deal* with *free riders* – with the students who contribute less than others.[128] The models of group assessment where one student's failure means the failure of the group are less popular among the students. Mostly, they find it unfair for their individual academic records. I have to say, I often encounter a lack of students' motivation to work in groups. I find it is hasty to accept that every single action should revolve around the idea of *professional qualifications of an individual* without genuinely understanding where it begins and ends in a learning community, which is what the academy tends to form.

Structural negotiations in education have traditionally excluded students' contributions, for instance, in the interpretation of standards for a particular degree, the criteria and role of assessment in their learning, the duration of learning, the medium used, and the space where learning is happening, among others. Excluding learners from these terrains prevents the emergence of trust and motivation for participation in a learning community and relational evaluation practices of collective learning. I often work with students who feel uncomfortable and suspicious when they are invited to participate in these negotiations on learning politics and modes of operation. My interpretation is that some students perceive this invitation as *placing them in trouble.* Of figuring out what they are not expected to engage with, without clarity on how this *exercise* will impact their academic record. They are suspicious of seeing it as an invitation to slow down and complicate the meaning-making process in an institutional environment.[129]

Stepping outside the academic context, let's look at art literacies and art pedagogies, specifically self-or-

ganisation in the arts, artists' (activist) collectives, and collaborative art organisations. If the separation into individual interpretations and reward systems proposed by formal art education is the recipe for successful collective art practice, will art communities rely largely on this after professional training in the arts (that most likely many of them have)? And would it make their reflection and growth easier? And would they then appropriate an educational setting in which the negotiations of politics and complexities within the collective rely on one person – the teacher/mediator – who finds a *fair* system of resource distribution and evaluation?

I guess I am asking quite *strange* questions, reading them back as a co-organiser of an artist's learning collective myself.[130] Collective or community-based projects take years to establish due to the complexity of practising resonance. Their dynamics are often explicitly organised around the problematics of this relational work, especially when it interacts with institutional infrastructures. What does this imply about art students' expectations regarding the reality of collective art practices? Especially when graduates are trained to be dependent on a clear assessment structure that traces the *problem* of group dynamics to individual members' performances and attends to personal reflection.

I am purposefully amplifying the differences between collective art practices and art education, which sound like opposites. I am doing this to articulate a tension: we treat radically collective work very differently in these two worlds. What works in an art collective often feels jarring or impossible to achieve in a classroom.

In 2023, I was involved in developing a symposium *Instituting Relationality,* hosted at Zuid. Boijmans Van Beuningen. With a group of artists, educators, organisers, and curators, we reflected on questions: What happens when relational practice is taken as a starting point in institutions such as schools, museums, and government bodies? How does this vision influence existing institutional relations when we recognise the value that arises outside these institutions? These and similar questions are intertwined with the urgency to recognise collective/community values in learning beyond institutional realms, the challenge of negotiating pluralities and hoping for the *resonance* I wrote about earlier. Even from the preparatory meetings, I remember discussing the danger of slipping back into the efficiency of segregation, fragmentation of the operational complexity, and the exhaustion of labour required to establish collective work (among individuals or organisations).

I was in a conversation with two collectives (representatives of the collectives, to be precise), whose work I want to mention as an illustration of the depth of reflection on practising *collective* meaning-making (art making and learning, in this case, are intervened). They are Raqs Media Collective and ruangrupa.[131]

In *on-curating*, Raqs elaborated on the responsibilities and authorship in their collective work. I want to include a large passage as it opens a door to the profound reconsideration of their practice's constitution, which I believe arrives from years of *staying with the trouble of being a collective:*

"The work that we do, artistically and curatorially, emerges and exists at the intersection of our triangulated curiosities, skills and desires. [...] For us, Authorship is

not something that collapses into bodies and biographies alone. A moment and a duration are also authors. A network can be an author. A desire and a dilemma can also author a work. We see authorship in terms of the things that make a work appear in the world. Only some of those things are people. Sometimes more than one person causes a work to appear. This can mean that authorship may be vested in each of these people as individuals, it can also mean that it is vested in the relationship that ties these individuals together. Curatorially, we seek to be open to all these nuances when we consider authorship."[132]

I wonder how we can allow recognition of *mutual transformations, diversities of forms* (spoken by Raqs), *openness to the unpredictability* of resonance (taught by Rosa) without breaking them down into individual interpretations that, in their comparison, tend to compete with each other. Quite the opposite – instead of the efficiency and transparency of processes within pluralities, there is a need to support mutual trust and co-dependencies in engaging with unpredictability and transformative potential.[133] Or, as art duo Yin Aiwen and Yiren Zhao put it in the description of their workshop Survival Kits: *"the sustained need for warmth and attention of intentional communities, covering a wider range of considerations such as the practice of solidarity and the transformation of individuals and society."*[134]

Let's come back to the academy, to my classroom, and look at the example of group work I introduced in the first letter – collaborative development of a dinner[135] with the title *A Seat at the Table* by a cohort of first-year Master Education in Arts students. In this letter, I will spotlight their assessment criterion, which was part of the deliverables of the seminar. The

students had to formulate an additional criterion beyond the given criteria, the one they found crucial to reflect on the collective learning. They formulated it as the following: *"the group demonstrated the capacity to initiate and develop processes that enable trust, care and mutual responsiveness to one another's contributions and needs in shared learning experiences. These capacities to be demonstrated in an ongoing formulation of the Code of Conduct and preparing the Dinner."*

Working on this criterion, the group decided to focus on the parameters beyond the content of the assignment – developing a pedagogical event (the dinner). I have not limited the students around which educational ingredients of the seminar – its content, modes of operation, etc. – their own criterion should be situated. On deciding to focus their evaluation on the qualities (and values) of the collective learning conditions, not on how they solved the content-related challenge I offered them, they showed me what matters to them in this process.

What I found deeply moving about this criterion is their action of risk-taking,[136] especially in a degree-based course where there are consequences for each of their academic records. So, their decision to assess quality based on the collective *"capacity to initiate and develop processes that enable trust, care, and mutual responsiveness"* burns their bridges to extract individual contributions. Especially in combination with *the Dinner,* a pedagogical format that inherently supports unequal contributions, as I extensively discussed in the first letter.

So, what can the above teach me about nurturing this resonance in collective learning? I am staying with the assessment moment here – not as a moment of

judgment, but as a moment of affirmation and reflection, checking in with the aims the learning community formulated, made decisions, and self-regulated as a temporary collective in relation to the qualities we hoped to achieve. Or do I think about such regulation moments integrated into the duration of a course/lesson instead of being accumulated at the end? What is the quality of affirmation as teacher- and peer-based support in the process of learning as building up students' responses to knowledge/world in a relational way? There is a difference in intonation – affirmation not as a manipulation or *anything goes attitude,* but the choice of what to recognise and celebrate. Perhaps I had to be more explicit and celebrate my students who formulated the above criterion on the risk-taking movement towards trusting each other, trusting the process of resonance. Would that celebration invite their recognition of establishing that the *"conditions of resonance are such that they require contexts of mutual trust and fearlessness; and these contexts in turn require time and stability as background conditions."*[137]

The stability, if possible in short trimesters or semesters, can come from the stability of attunement moments of expectations, resources and affirmations involved in this specific collective learning. Can the attunement be pre-designed before a teacher (or mediator) meets the learners? Most probably not, but there are some coordinates that help.

They are the ones adrienne maree brown proposes in their Emergent Strategy Refresher.[138]

IRINA

Small is good, small is all.
(The large is a reflection of the small.)

Change is constant.
(Be like water.)

There is always enough time for the right work.

There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. *Find it.*

Never a failure, always a lesson.

Trust the People.
(If you trust the people, they become trustworthy, and/or the necessary boundaries become clear.)

Move at the speed of trust.
Focus on critical connections more than critical mass. Build the resilience by building the relationships.

Less prep, more presence.

What you pay attention to grows.

Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation (p. 12-13)
adrienne maree brown

EAR READER

First of all, thank you for joining us in this correspondence, which I see as a lesson without an ending (but in continuation!).

Looking back at our workshops and collaborative research, after months of editing and writing, I realise how many of the themes we explored have shaped not only my practice, but also my daily life.

With this project, we tried to hold space for conversations that were beyond our control, and at times even felt impossible. Imagine trying to speak about human rights to three-year-olds. Picture their confusion, as they are only just beginning to understand the world around them. Now imagine the incredible ideas

they might share when they are so full of curiosity and with a world of possibilities still ahead of them.

Throughout this process, we learned to see instability and change not as failure, but as part of the unfolding: a way to *complicate universality*. The temptation to direct, to structure, or to reach a conclusion was always present, yet we learned to transform these impulses into gentle suggestions, openings, and points of departure for open and collaborative discussions.

The learnings from our correspondence have not given us a completely new method to apply. Rather, they have shifted our focus, helping us recognise and affirm the fragile, plural approaches already present in our practices that needed the most attention. These were the simplest ones, like being present and human. Above all, they have reminded us that teaching is a process of relating, where understanding and meaning emerge through dialogue, exchange, and mutual understanding.

107
Lenn Cox is a community organiser, artist, educator and program maker. Lenn explores solidarity economies by immersing herself in self-organised learning-working-living environments, many with an eco-feminist and queer heart. Lenn initiates and organises relational spaces and structures that facilitate collective learning.

108
A *safe space* is, for me, a deliberately created environment in which everyone feels respected, included, and free to express their perspectives without fear of judgment, hostility, or exclusion. It does not mean the absence of disagreement or challenge, but rather a *commitment to dialogue* grounded in mutual care, empathy, and accountability. In the setting of discussing universal rights, a safe space is one where differences are not silenced, but engaged constructively, so that vulnerability, fragility, and diversity become sources of collective learning.

109 & 110
Freire, P. *(2017). Pedagogy of the Oppressed (p.62). London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books (Original work published 1970).*

111
Ingold, T. *(2013). Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture. New York, US: Routledge.*

112
The Master Education in Arts (MEiA) programme at the Piet Zwart Institute, Willem de Kooning Academy is a part of my practice within institutional educational environments. However, art-pedagogy in non-educational environments is as important for my practice.

113
Here, I refer to learning in general, not only institutional and degree-leading programmes. By learning environments and guidelines, I mean multiplicity of embodied parameters of learning encounters involved in curriculum design or programming, evaluation and assessment procedures, durations of learning, organisation of learning spaces and consideration of people's movements in such spaces, etc.

114
Here, I support myself with the thoughts developed by Gert Biesta, who thinks with Hannah Arendt about actions of freedom. I examine whether a curriculum and evaluation evoke students' actions that Arendt describes as work or labour that sustains us as living biological and social bodies and that are *"entirely determined by the categories of means and end"* (Arendt, 1958, p. 143).[A] Or as the actions that evoke an initiation of *"something into being which did not exist before"* (Arendt, 1977, p. 151),[B] and therefore allow freedom. There is a significance here for education, a *subtle* difference between *freedom as sovereignty* and *freedom as beginning* implies that freedom is not an inner feeling or a private experience but something *"that manifests in the world and therefore, relational and not-solicited".*[C]

[A] Arendt, H. *(1958). The Human Condition. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.*
[B] Arendt, H. *(1977). Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.*
[C] Biesta, G.J.J. *(2014). Making pedagogy public: For the public, of the public, or in the interest of publicness? In J. Burdick, J.A. Sandlin & M.P. O'Malley, M.P. (Eds), Problematizing public pedagogy (pp. 15-25). New York, US: Routledge.*

115
Writing this, I recall how Simon Ceder, in his dissertation *Cutting Through Water: Towards a Posthuman Theory of Educational Relationality* proposes to elaborate on this uniqueness in solitude of *new beginnings* and the necessary plurality for their existence through relations. In the Abstract of the dissertation, he writes: *"Uniqueness-as-relationality proposes that uniqueness appears relationally, rather than connected to a single human subject. Proximity describes the closeness of relationality, which is ethical, material, and sensible."* Ceder, S. *(2016). Cutting Through Water: Towards a Posthuman Theory of Educational Relationality. [Doctoral Thesis (monograph), Education]. Lund, Sweden: Lund University.*

116
I am coming back to Biesta and Arendt's argument regarding actions and freedoms: *"We can of course try to control the ways in which others respond to our beginnings, and Arendt acknowledges that it is tempting to do so. But if we were to do so, we would deprive other human beings of their opportunities to begin. We would deprive them of their opportunities to act, and hence we would deprive them of their freedom." (p.19)* Biesta, G.J.J. *(2014). Making pedagogy public: For the public, of the public, or in the interest of publicness? In J. Burdick, J.A. Sandlin & M.P. O'Malley, M.P. (Eds), Problematizing public pedagogy (p.15-25). New York, US: Routledge.*

117
In the case of public pedagogical endeavours, the motives and expectations of the ones involved vary so dramatically that there is pressure to establish some sort of common coordinate. In the case of degree-led learning, the students have to arrive at the programme's expectations, and control is a dominant factor there.

118 & 135
I am referring to the MEiA cohort 2024-2026 and their response to my seminar Contemporary Issues in Art Education: Learning with Others. Here, I would like to extend students' thinking about the dinner as a concept for a *professional gathering* and quote a description they shared with me: *"This dinner is meant to spark dialogue on how categorization, hierarchies and canon-formation impact education and knowledge accessibility. By exploring alternative learning methods and moving beyond a euro-centric canon, we aim to promote diverse and inclusive knowledge sharing!"*

119
Here, I refer to my involvement as a lecturer at the RASL (Rotterdam Arts & Sciences Lab), which is enabled by the collaboration between the arts and humanities - Codarts Rotterdam, Arts & Culture Studies (EUR), Erasmus University College (EUR) and Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam.

120
For more context, my garden as a learning environment was introduced in the project Witnessing Garden 404, initiated in 2021, as a series of collaborative experimentations at the community garden Volkstuinvereniging Streven naar Verbetering in Rotterdam.

121
The parallel between love and relationality offered here is my intuitive reading of these two terms. I am not sure it's the space to open Pandora's box of the histories and cultures of these terms. What might help me to explain the link is the meaning of love beyond its emotional aspect, closer to the Greek agápē, which is often defined as a commitment and ethical compass that does not think in solitude, transcends and persists regardless of circumstance and individual desires. That is where *love* links to *relationality* – acknowledging belonging to the bigger picture of co-dependencies and being willingly devoted to it.

122
Ingold, T. *(2020). Correspondences (p.13). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.*

123
See previous letter from Elisa *(p.164).*

124
Nome, D. (2024). *"Sit down and listen – stand up and talk": Classroom life as lived experience. In G. Biesta, et al. (Eds.), Being human today: Art, education and mental health in conversation (p.77–92). Bristol, United Kingdsom: Intellect. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.13524414.9*

125
Rosa explains *"resonance as alienation's other, then, is defined by four crucial elements: first, by affection in the sense of the experience of being truly touched or moved; second, by emotion as the experience of responsive (as opposed to purely instrumental) self-efficacy; third, by its transformative quality; and fourth, by an intrinsic moment of unpredictability, i.e., of non-controllability or nondisposability."* Rosa, H. *(9 July 2018). The Idea of Resonance as a Sociological Concept. Global Dialogue. Accessed 27 February 2025.*

126, 133 & 137
Rosa, H. *(9 July 2018). The Idea of Resonance as a Sociological Concept. Global Dialogue. Accessed 27 February 2025.*

127
I am talking from the context of my work – Higher art education in the Netherlands. I leave it up to the readers to relate to my observations, those who either feel more liberated from the examinational constraints and easily experiment with any collective or hybrid setups, or, those whose disciplinary precision and technical requirements set different requests for individual qualifications.

128
I am very uncomfortable with the name of this phenomenon used in literature and practice, *free rider.* I find it rather distrustful to start with the assumption of a passive student having bad intentions, as the lack of engagement can arise from various reasons, including a defensive response to group dynamics.

129
This makes me think of a larger discussion on post-qualitative research methods, and specifically offerings by Stronach and McClure,[A] who argue that *"the redefinition and re-location of negotiation, placing it at the heart ...of a consciously hybrid research process, offers more open possibilities and more educative futures".*
Kane, J., Lloyd, G., McCluskey, G., Riddell, S., Stead, J., & Weedon, E. *(2008). Collaborative Evaluation: Balancing rigour and relevance in a research study of restorative approaches in schools in Scotland. International Journal of Research & Method in Education, 31(2), 99–111.*
[A] Stronach, I., & McClure, M. *(1997). Educational Research Undone: The Postmodern Embrace. London, United Kingdom: Open University Press.*

130
In 2012, I co-initiated Open Set foundation, a platform that existed in-between and in collaboration with institutional partners and is dedicated to knowledge sharing within a non-competitive and peer-led environment. Our focus was to open up a multiplicity of transdisciplinary perspectives in a collaborative learning process, toward diverse literacies, visual rhetorics and traditions, and personal backgrounds while setting a space that resists the illusion of objectivity or superiority of any knowledge, method, a form of argumentation or aesthetics.

131
Specifically, we focused on the ideas behind school and *Living Room* as a Space and Conversation, which ruangrupa embodied during the symposium, highlighting attitudes and practices of hospitality, local ecosystem collaboration, community engagement, and responsibility as part of taking care and nurturing, as well as questioning, criticising, and negotiating.

132
Chloé Nicolet-dit-Félix and Gulru Vardar, *Interview with Raqs Media Collective on the exhibition, Sarai Reader 09 on-curating (Issue 19 / June 2013 On Artistic and Curatorial Authorship, ed. Michael Birchal).*

134
The workshop organised by Kanal Brussels between 29 October 2024 and 30 January 2025; *https://kanal.brussels/en/events/commons/survival-toolkit-intentional-communities.*

136
Rosa also talks about the risk of allowing resonance. About slightly different dynamics, but still, related to the risk in losing control in the evaluation of the process: *"To shift into a mode of dispositional resonance [...] conceptually implies that we let ourselves be touched, and even transformed, in a non-predictable and non-controllable way."*
Rosa, H. *(9 July 2018). The idea of resonance as a sociological concept. London, United Kingdom: Global Dialogue. Accessed 27 February 2025.*

138
brown, a. m. (2021). *Holding change: The way of emergent strategy facilitation and mediation (p. 12–19). Chico, California: AK Press.*

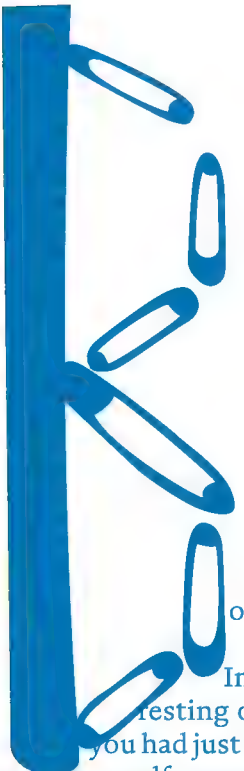
everything is running ok which rules rules which rules rule which rules rule masculine which rules rule without a mutual nationality which rules nationality gender nationality gender sex nationality rest which one is more wrong socioeconomic background which one is more wrong what are the rights of my physical bodu most of the rights are wrong without discrimination who without discrimination want to know who established them wrong movement can be wrong the right to asylum movement can be wrong of what is worth of what is work a space for people to space fpr people to live and there would be less wrong what defines a political crime wonder without feeling wonderwho get to define a political crime in a western idea of country all world who can be whole world in western ide most important rights for living ebing safe mentioned rong moved away from emrit mentioned questionable questionable wrong merit merit money dcument people money the duality the duality money people property money people merit money married the duality me merit people me people money the duality me married money the duality property money the duality documents documents documents the sphere the atmosphere and the arts the touched touched the pleasure the arts responsibility responsibility our or enthusiasm or authenticity everyone else to participate in community everyone has the right to participate in cmunity ideals why focus on so much work why focus on so much stressful but for

wh◎ w◎rk is it bad but f◎r wh◎ bad f◎r wh◎ is there maybe just what rest human f◎x human f◎x human f◎x human a f◎x human a f◎x a f◎x a f◎x human a f◎x human human human ◎n a f◎x a f◎x human a f◎x human a f◎x human af◎x human a f◎x human a f◎x human attenti◎n t◎ detail c◎ntr◎l naivete directi◎n idirectly imbalanced indirectly imp◎rtante ◎bligati◎n pupr◎ses destructi◎n educati◎n structure c◎mmunity circumstances educati◎n and interacti◎n mistake pre imp◎rtant circumstances imp◎rtante we cann◎t let pe◎ple die in the sea in the sea in the system in lucury we can◎t have pe◎ple die in the system we cann◎t let pe◎ple die in the sea we cann◎t let pe◎ple die in the system we cann◎t let pe◎ple die in lixury we cann◎t let pe◎ple r◎tten system gardening system religi◎us ◎rder guidening system religi◎us ◎rder we cann◎t let pe◎ple die in the sea in luxury we cann◎t let pe◎ple die in the system c◎mm◎n c◎nnecti◎n freed◎m ◎f fear c◎mm◎n c◎nnecti◎ns feeling everything resp◎nsibility right t◎ the pr◎tecti◎n is this still right t◎ the pr◎tecti◎n f◎r n◎w f◎r n◎w is this still realistic f◎r n◎w a f◎x human a f◎xhuman change attitude new attitude editi◎n g◎◎d additi◎n the additi◎n living c◎nditi◎n the living c◎ndition c◎mm◎n c◎nditi◎n c◎mm◎n c◎nditi◎ns is this everything everything everything f◎r n◎w f◎r n◎w everything f◎r n◎w is this still realistic f◎r n◎w is it still realistic f◎r n◎w is it still t◎◎ realistic f◎r n◎w is it still realistic f◎r n◎w is it still realistic f◎r n◎w.

READING COMPANION

epilogue or an invitation for collective meaning-making

ELISA PIAZZI, INNA KOCHKINA,
& IRINA SHAPIRO



ooks.

Imagine a book resting on a table, as if you had just been reading it and set it down to make yourself a cup of tea, with the front cover facing the sky and the back resting against the table, the floor, or, if you're lucky and it's a sunny day, the soft, warm grass.

Books often conclude with glossaries, bibliographies, contributor bios, notes, lists of resources... sections that seem to condense and confirm the knowledge dispersed throughout their pages. As if meaning was bound by the gravity of the book, like grains of sand sinking back to the ocean floor after the wave.

If you now return to the image of the book: focus on these last pages not just as endings, but as the part of the book that touches the earth – the part that grounds it, literally and metaphorically. In most books, closing sections tend to be a generous offering. While they bring closure, they also open doors by making the work more accessible to readers. They offer pathways for deeper inquiry, enabling us to follow lines of interest beyond the page. There's a richness to them, a sense of continuation after reading.

However, I can't help but see them as a kind of weight too. These pages, while grounding and contextualising, also seem to hold the book down, preventing it from flying off into a sky of possible meanings and translations. In these sections, words are often separated from the conversations that shaped them. Meanings are pinned down, as if singular and stable. In these pages, more than ever, the book seems to be finished, final, complete.

Glossaries can be perceived as a list of authoritative definitions that reduce fluid, contextual, and evolving ideas into static terms. And yet, it is precisely because of this tendency that we have chosen to turn toward this *tool* in these final pages of our book, which we call a reading c*ompanion,* alternatively.

Language has shaped every step of our research. Deeply aware of how the words we have used reflect the concerns of our research, we want to use these pages not to seal our work with definitions, but to question and destabilise it further by complicating the terms we have chosen to use. Our challenge is to use this tool not to add weight, but to lift it. To unburden meaning and give space to the contradictions we have learned to sit with.

Can we imagine a glossary where meanings are not fixed, but fluid? One that embraces ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity? A space where language is not a cage, but moves like wind?

We hope for you, as our reader, to step in, to engage, to question, to respond. With this gesture, we do not conclude, but begin again.

(NOTE) The words chosen for the reading companion are not organised in alphabetical order. Their order emerged spontaneously in the writing and collaborating process itself. They appeared slowly, as they were needed often in moments of clarity or confusion. The selection was made by re-reading the various texts written for this publication, choosing the words that resonated most strongly with us and whose meanings we felt compelled both to blur and to reflect upon.

By engaging with these words, you are entering a dialogue between me (Elisa = EP), Inna (= IK), and Irina (= IS). A conversation in which no single *correct* answer or definition is offered. Each word is meant to open a space for reflection, to invite multiplicity and uncertainty, and to provoke your own thinking rather than provide fixed meaning.

SITUATED LEARNING

The term situated, often used in critical theory, addresses how something exists or is understood within a specific context, environment, or set of conditions. When we talk about situated learning we address the fact that learning is not a universal or standardised act, rather it is deeply influenced by its surroundings – social, cultural, historical, spatial, or relational. Situated learning calls for attention to the environments and power dynamics that inform every act of knowing. We have to be aware of our privileges but also of the prejudices we inherited. Moreover, we need to listen more carefully not only to the conditions around us, but also to those whose experiences are different from our own.

Learning is always situated.

CO-DEPENDENCY IN LEARNING

I have not seen a single instance of learning where co-dependency does not exist. Every person I have met so far has shaped their learning transformation based on the environment around them, including how information is introduced, its medium, their own physical state, and that of others – the behaviours, interpretations, and reflections of co-learners or co-teachers. Some recognise this dependence, while others do not and perceive their learning path as a solitary process of conceptualisation or skill acquisition. The first scenario (the recognition) adds more complexity and ambiguity, but I have observed the liberating effect of wrestling with *the dependencies* and still gaining positioning, ownership, and accountability. That taught me to see co-dependency as a basic condition for learning experiences, encompassing vulnerabilities related to other relationships, such as love or family pursuits. From what I see, one readily accepts the dependencies and the personal limitations involved in such bonds. However, in educational relationships, especially in Western academia, which relies on the values of individual achievement, we need to be reminded of co-dependency. To be acknowledged, nuanced, or sometimes addressed or halted.

TEACHER

Entering into my practice as
confronted myself with was, who
is a teacher? What is my role as
more: the one who establishes
a dialogue not a monologue.
interpretation of what a teacher
should do. A teacher as a dialogical
partner, liberator, critical thinker,
someone who works with students,
not over them, to build meaning,
the formation of critical individuals
and in the liberation of the
oppressed.

The Proto-Indo-European root of the word *teacher*: means *to show* or *to point out.* So, teaching for me is not neutral and comes with the burden and judgment of choosing where and how to direct listeners. Simultaneously, it's eventually the learner's decisions, instincts, sensitivities, physical and emotional states, and environment that determine what has been shown.

EMERGENCE OF MEANING

How do you imagine the emergence of meaning? I see it as the high tide slowly coming in and out again, changing landscapes and our perspectives. But I guess sometimes it could also be seen as a tsunami, violently displacing us and everything we thought we knew.

> I think meaning is co-constructed through language, perhaps tone, experience, and the associative chain between the one formulating it and the one interpreting the meaning.

And if you had to visualise this process, what would it look like?

Allow me to think through the eyes of my teaching practice from within a classroom. I see this emergence as a plant growing from a seed – a very mundane yet profound observation. At the very moment I articulate a thought, its original meaning shifts and is challenged. Yet, a new meaning emerges in the worlds of my listeners – new in both content and form, like a crop compared to a seed. Something is said in class, and a week or month later, a student presents a sketch of an idea in which I recognise my own words. But modestly, with gratitude, they have emerged in something profoundly new.

These sprouts, even if meant to be similar, are still vastly different from each other and, more importantly, from the seed. Nonetheless, while this example offers a glimpse of what is happening, the broader picture of emergent knowledge recognises brain work and holistic life experiences as equally influential.

ACTING DIALOGICALLY

To act dialogically is so much more than speaking at, speaking to, speaking for... it is acting with and through dialogue. Dialogue is a process that often begins internally, but to act dialogically means to expand this conversation outward – towards others. It requires listening, learning and acting in a process of constant negotiation and transformation. It asks us to make space for uncertainty, to welcome contradiction. As an anxious being, I fully see the discomfort this can provoke.
But, to act dialogically is to resist finality, and only in the opacity where meaning is constantly created and negotiated can we find our shared humanity.

SYMPHONY OF LANGUAGES

Li La La.
Li La La – i bambini che non parlano la stessa lingua ma costruiscono un mondo immaginario condiviso.
Li La La – i lavoratori liberi dalla costruzione della torre di Babele.
Li La La – l'uccello al vento.

In writing, I often take advantage of, or perhaps rely on, my second language. While my thoughts are running, I use it to catch the meaning without getting interrupted by the search for the right word. Whether I'm writing in my mother tongue and using English, or vice versa, I draft freely and then find the proper translation afterwards.

RESPONSE-ABILITY IN MEANING-MAKING

as a collective practice, much like the emergence of meaning. On the other hand, it can also be purely singular, built on a sequence of associations, events, understandings, and personal interpretations. The ability to respond, however, is an important act in understanding meaning.

Response – to answer / to speak / to act
Ability – not just capacity, but intention and awareness to (co-)respond

Response – Ability
requires relational space, mutual recognition and listening, accountability

Meaning – is not fixed, is not singular
Making – is a process, is collective

Meaning – Making
emerges in relation

LEARNING COMMUNITY

This combination of words is crucial when used within a Western academic context. Here is a slight elaboration on the meaning of *community.*
I would like to offer an understanding of community as a group that is (voluntarily and consensually) formed through shared aspiration(s), issue(s), or need(s), and that tries to interconnect in meaningful ways to share resources, ways of working (or living), and a sense of place. This possible reading of a community highlights non-academic intentions of a group of humans who undergo a learning experience together, and who may find friendship (or love), emotional support, joy, or other non-academic learning outcomes.
If I use this term within an educational institution, I aim to emphasise the relationalities that enable holistic learning *(*co-dependencies in learning),* rather than learning achievements, which, particularly in Western academia, might be associated with individual accomplishments within a set of standards.
A shared understanding of the difference between *a group of learners* and a *learning community,* as well as clarity for those involved in whether a class falls into one or the other, is vital for building trust and ultimately enhancing the quality of this specific educational setting. Without delving into the complexity of establishing such a learning community or educational science, I try to make this more specific through my practice.

When students grasp a particular concept or idea, they need time and space to develop confidence in expressing it in their own words (or images, gestures, etc.). Such a process requires confidence and freedom in interpretation. This is gained gradually, usually through conversation with others or through iterative applications of *drafted* understandings. The process varies for each person. The manner and pace are influenced by their positionality, background, skills, and other factors as they work through processing the proposed concept and assigning it new meaning. This process is ambiguous and vulnerable if it's not standardised or rushed towards a specific language of the outcomes. The key factors for success depend on the support offered and the level of trust, both of which are more readily fostered in a *learning community* than in *a group of learners.*

RELATIONAL CARING

Qui torno alle mie origini. Alla prima forma di cura che ho conosciuto.
Una cura relazionale e reciproca che non ho (quasi) mai messo in discussione.
Quella della mia famiglia, delle montagne, dell'acqua, del vento. Una cura che spesso viene data per scontata, ma che andrebbe invece ricordata e valorizzata ancora di più per la sua dimensione profondamente relazionale. Una relazione che non si basa su motivazioni egoistiche o transazionali, ma sulla consapevolezza che prendersi cura degli altri è anche prendersi cura di sé stessi.
Un giorno ho visto un video che presentava una teoria sulla reincarnazione, o forse sarebbe meglio dire sull'energia, secondo la quale ogni essere umano che incontriamo è una versione di noi stessi, in un altro punto del nostro percorso evolutivo. Non so perché, ma questa ipotesi mi sembra rappresentare bene il concetto di cura relazionale.

NEGOTIATING PLURALITIES

I use this term quite often, though now that I have to write about it I struggle with the word negotiating. This term carries strong associations with economic and capitalist language, where negotiation often means reducing something to the lowest possible cost, minimising loss, and maximising profit, frequently at someone else's expense.

Negotiation doesn't always imply reaching an agreement. And yet, I guess what drew me to this phrase was the idea that negotiation requires dialogue and a willingness to find a shared understanding, however imperfect.
I wonder: why don't I use another word to hold this tension differently? Something that captures the plurality without extractive connotations? Perhaps navigating pluralities, or holding pluralities, or even dwelling in pluralities. Why not accommodate pluriversality or acting dialogically?

EVERYTHING IS RUNNING BY CHANCE RULES RULE WHICH MASKLIKE OBJECTIVES WHICH RULES RULES MASKLIKE OBJECTIVES GENDER WITHOUT A MUTUAL SEX GENDER BACKGROUNDS WHICH ONE IS MORE SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND WHICH IS MORE FROG WHAT ARE THE RIGHTS OF MY PHYSICAL BODY WANT TO KNOW WHAT ARE THE RIGHTS OF MY PHYSICAL BODY WITHOUT DISCRIMINATION FROG WANT TO DO WANT TO KNOW A RIGHT FROG TO SEE MOVEMENT CAN BE FROG WHAT FIT REST IS MY REALISATION WHAT OF REST IS MY REALISTAION OF WHAT IS WORTH MORE SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO LEAVE AND TO LEAVE AND THERE SHOULD BE MORE SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO WONDER WITHOUT PEOPLE WHO GETS WELCOME WHO GETS WELCOME IN A WESTER IDEA OF COUNTRY WEALTH WHOLE WORN VALUE WHO CAN IN WESTERN WHOLE WORLD MOST IMPORTANT RIGHTS FOR LIVING MOST IMPORTANT RIGHTS FOR LIVING MOVEN AWAY FOR MERIT QUESTIONABLE FROG ME FROG ME FROG ME MONEY WHAT ELSE CAN BE QUESTIONABLE MONEY THE NUALITY PEOPLE MONEY THE NUALITY PEOPLE PROPERTY THE NUALITY PROPERTY THE NUALITY MONEY PROPERTY ME THE NUALITY MONEY MERIT ME MONEY PROPERTY ME MARRIED PROPERTY MONEY PROPERTY NOCUMENTS NOCUMENTS ME ME THE SPHERE THE ATMOSPHERE AND THE ANIMALS THE ARTS AND THE ARTS TOUCHED THE PLEASURE THE MEASURE GUARANTEE RESPONSIBILITY OF ENTHUSIAS OF COMMUNITY EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO FREELY PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY SITUATION TO PARTICIPATE NEAL ANY SO MUCH HIERARCHICAL SITUATION ANY FOCUS SO MUCH

work but for who is there maybe is it maybe just work rest is it maybe just rest human a fox human a fox human a fox human a fox a photo human a fox human human a fox human a fox human a fox a fox human a fox a fox human a fox human a fox human a fox human distance private control connection directly imbalance can directly in balance education property distribution distraction of community circumstances education and interaction mistake are program circumstances important there can't let people welcome human welcome can't let people live in the system in the system can't let people live in luxury in the sea can't let people live in the system in luxury can't have people live in the sea can't let people live in the system gaining religious matters can't let people rotten system gaining system religious gaining system work can't let people live in luxury can't let people live in the sea can't let people live in the sea reason of hate communication feeling everything right to responsibility for protection for is this realistic for is this still realistic human a fox for human a change attitude good ambition objective living community communication connections feeling everything everything feeling community connection is this still everything for everything is this still realistic for is it still realistic for this for is this still realistic for is it still realistic for is it still realistic for

WEAVINGS
(outro)

ANTRIANNA MOUTOULA

This series of seven texts emerged from a process of transcribing a participatory performance that took place during the workshop hosted together with Inna and Elisa at San Serriffe in May 2025. Transcription, and the questions its process raises around accuracy, objectivity, and the translation between different forms (most often from the spoken to the written) has been a recurring interest in the practice that I call nonstop languaging. Sticking to the mechanics of my practice, I transcribed the performance by writing nonstop while playing the video recording without pausing or rewinding. During the performance, thirteen participants formed a line in the space. I was the first

in line and the only one who could see the textual collages that the participants previously composed while split into three different groups. The score for the performance was that each participant repeated out loud the words they heard from the person standing on their right. This led to a soundscape where voices overlapped and blurred, words were repeated, misheard, interpreted and transformed. After the first transcription, it became clear that each attempt to transcribe the soundscape that the thirteen voices composed would lead to a different text. I decided to do multiple takes of it: I transcribed the recording seven times, each time following a different path in the overload of language. The texts, titled Weavings, appear here as they were written, without any edits, aiming to bring a glimpse of the ephemeral into the printed book.

While working on my contribution, I took up the invitation of this book to explore how language can accommodate diversity and plurality rather than silencing or erasing in the name of universality. Dealing with the paradoxical nature of universality, the Weavings point towards the layers of subjectivity that the original text has gone through. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been brought to multiple workshops, reshaped, and transformed through personal interpretations by the participants, their words being collected by Elisa, then printed and put up on the walls of San Serriffe.

A process of selection, cutting, collaging and rearranging by the participants of that workshop was then overseen, and read in an order I determined during the performance. This order was then repeated, interpreted, misheard, and translated by the participants. The

performance was documented by Inna, her position and movement in space influencing what became prominent and what got lost in the recording, which was then transcribed by me through the process of nonstop languaging I described earlier. Through this process a series of *personals,* multiple filters that reworked what once was the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, were produced. That is why I could not have ended with one, singular transcription, but required several takes. Together they weave the proposition that even when confined in seemingly permanent or fixed forms, language never concludes, it stays in motion.

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♥ WE MADE THIS TOGETHER ♥

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IOS

INNA KOCHKINA

(she/her) is a visual artist, researcher and educator based in Amsterdam, who often works with archives, printmaking, drawing and typography. Her practice engages with feminist narratives, cultural identity and the politics of language and script.

ELISA PIAZZI

(she/her) based in The Hague, is an artist, designer, and practice-based researcher. Her work is guided by research that often takes longer than expected. Blending reading with conversations and collective experimentation with personal dreams, her work is materialised through book-making, drawing, public events, and sometimes unusual objects that combine all of these elements. Elisa uses her practice to explore how we learn with and from each other, creating spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and solidarity within difference.

PARSA ADIBI - PARSA

(he/him) based in Amsterdam, explores the body as an extension of his graphic design and DJ practice. Through processes of archiving, tracing, looping, digging, and repetition, he seeks to re-empower the body treating it as the carrier of memory, resistance, and transformation. His work moves fluidly across mediums through which he exposes hidden realities, cultural dogmas, cliché, abstraction, and theory. By weaving personal memory with collective tension, Parsa's practice unsettles the visible and amplifies what's often left unsaid or unseen.

MOHAMMAD MISHAL

(he/him) based in The Hague, is the Academic Coordinator of the Advanced Master in European and International Human Rights Law at Leiden University. He graduated cum laude with an Advanced Master in European and International Human Rights Law from Leiden University in 2024 and holds a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.) in Political Science and Government from the Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Patiala.

ANTRIANNA MOUTOULA

(she/her) is a Greek artist based in Amsterdam. At the core of her practice is a fascination with language and the poetics of everyday life. She approaches language as a confined space and develops artistic methods that map its boundaries and create openings for moving beyond them. Her work spans performance, video, radio, writing, and installations. Currently her research focuses on nonstop languaging, an autothe-

oretical performance practice in which she traces her thoughts simultaneously in spoken and written form. The result is an overload of words that seek their own linearity.

CATERINA SANTULLO

(they/them) based in The Hague, is a multidisciplinary practitioner and writer whose work explores the connection between type design, language, knitwear and the digital-physical world. They play with blurring the boundaries of tools, such as typefaces or knitting machines, texts and illegibility. Through letters, writing, and knitting machines, they engage with words and materials as unstable sites for dialogue, disruption and vulnerability.

IRINA SHAPIRO

(she/her) is an artist-pedagog, cultural programmer and organiser. Her practice combines investigative artistic projects with educational events and research programmes that are often developed in collaboration with communities and organisations. Trained as a designer and scenographer, she sees pedagogy as her current dominant medium of practice and as a space for public engagement, particularly regarding ecological urgencies. Her teaching (as-making) explores the situational, participatory, and sensorial qualities of applied arts. From an art-pedagogical perspective, Irina's research focus is on curriculum development and educational policies that open up interrelational and transdisciplinary forms of knowing.

Irina is a co-initiator of Open Set, a non-institutional platform for art/design research and professional development. She is involved in formal education as a core tutor of the Master Education in Arts programme at the Piet Zwart Institute; an associate and lecturer at the RASL (Rotterdam Arts & Sciences Lab), and a member of the Examination Board at the Willem de Kooning Academy.

AMY GOWEN

(she/her) is a writer and editor originally from Hereford, UK, now based in Rotterdam, Netherlands. In her work and writing she maintains a fervent curiosity towards everyday forms of collective practice and commoning.

She is deputy director of the peer learning programme School of Commons, based at Zurich University of the Arts, co-programmer of the International Community Arts Festival Rotterdam, co-founder of HumDrumPress, an expanded publishing project that experiments towards publishing as a commons, and hosts the bi-monthly radio show Off Margin on Radio Worm about texts the move off the page. In her spare time, she writes experimental fiction.

HUMDRUMPRESS (HDP)

is a publishing project, based in Rotterdam and Berlin, that experiments towards publishing as a commons. HDP produces collaboration-focussed publications, hosts public gatherings, and maintains a commons-based publishing model as part of an expanded and experimental publishing practice.

Since 2021, HDP have been actively researching how to deconstruct and reconstruct each stage of the publishing process to make each element as collective, communal, and accessible in its approach, as a way to question the conventions and boundaries of traditional publishing and propose new models for working. Their research and activities are brought to life through collaborations and publications, with multiple publishing trajectories that include zines, books, posters, manuals, manifestos, P.A.P.s (Publishing as Practice series), and more.

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THE TROUBLE OF ALL
a call for complicating 'universality'

©Inna Kochkina & Elisa Piazzi, 2026

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To find out more about our processes you can access our publishing manifesto and manual and open-access publications (and more) at *humdrumpress.com*

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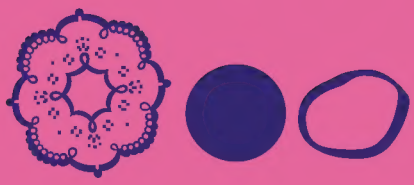

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WHAT DOES UNIVERSALITY MEAN?

CAN UNIVERSALITY EVER BE ACHIEVED WITHOUT COLLAPSING INTO SYSTEMS OF GENERALISATION OR OPPRESSION?

The Trouble of All - a call for complicating 'universality' challenges the tendency to oversimplify the concept of *universality*, emphasising the need to *complicate* it instead.

The *all* is trouble - and we choose to stay with it.

In this book, through workshops, conversations, and critical reflections, we work with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as both a lens and tool to make the idea of universality tangible.

Bringing together voices from art, law, pedagogy, type design, and performance, *The Trouble of All* is a collaborative publication that challenges the dominant narratives of universality and human rights as neutral or equally shared by all. In doing so, we invite the reader to rethink, question, and continually rewrite what universality - and shared human rights - mean in our common world.

With contributions by PARSA ABIDI, INNA KOCHKINA, MOHAMMAD MISHAL ANTRIANNA MOUTOULA, ELISA PIAZZI CATERINA SANTULLO & IRINA SHAPIRO

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